

CHAPTER 4

*Freedom and Control on the Southern Institutions,  
New South Wales, 1879–1909*

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The first of the new and more permanent generation of church and state Aboriginal stations in New South Wales was Warangesda. It was founded in 1879 by the self-appointed lay-missionary John Gribble (father of the more famous Ernest), in Wiradjuri country, on the banks of the Murrumbidgee River, close to Darlington Point and some one hundred kilometres downstream from Narrandera. At 800 hectares it remained, for nearly fifty years, one of the largest Aboriginal stations in the state. My intention in this chapter is to ask: what was the meaning of the new generation of Aboriginal institutions which were established in New South Wales in the last decades of the nineteenth century? What was their impact on Aboriginal civilisation, then and now? I will examine a single passage from the Warangesda manager's diary, written in 1894—a short but eloquent piece which contains all those aspects of policy, conflict, personality and cultural clash which make the new generation of state-run stations so critical.

**A Dormitory Confrontation**

On 7 June 1894, the manager wrote:

There was another bother with MRS SWIFT today. She openly accuses FANNY HELAND of being enceinte & told the girls in the Dorm they ought all to laugh at her & while she was at the washtub yesterday called her a sulky looking pig. FANNY came & told manager this am & when he spoke to MRS SWIFT she said it was all false, that she did not use any such expression. The manager asked her if she ever said of NANCY MURRAY that she was a Chinese looking thing. Which she indignantly denied, but Buckley said he heard her use the expression and FANNY HELAND says she heard her call NANCY a yellow Chinaman. And called the manager a hypocrite and that all the whites were a lot of hypocrites. After the bother MRS SWIFT poked her tongue out at FANNY & made faces at her. NANCY MURRAY says she said to the girls in the Dorm she would put the people against the manager, & as far as the manager has been able to find out has not done so.<sup>1</sup>

*'The Girls in the Dorm'*

Of the snapshots of institutional life to be examined in this intriguing passage, we start with the most obvious—the girls themselves. The dormitory girls are aged between 6 and 16, and one, it seems, is pregnant. Probably there were never more than twenty or thirty in residence, but the girls' dormitory was in some ways the showpiece of all the early mission stations. Girls' education focused on all that the Christian missions were trying to achieve. The concept of the dormitory-school had been modelled on Victorian practice, in that not all girls had their parents living on the same mission station; some had been induced to come from elsewhere, even from outside Wiradjuri country. Like the Ramahyuck girls, they were to be specifically educated into the virtues and habits of working class White women: they were to become domestic maids, and later wives and mothers in British-style cottages. But unlike Ramahyuck, education on and for the mission station was no longer an aim in itself. An unfavourable report by the District Inspector of the Department of Public Instruction in 1887 had described Warangesda as a failure and recommended that the children be sent into domestic service (O'Byrne 1887). The stations, subject to non-Aboriginal pressures both to contain the inmates in groups within the boundaries and, simultaneously, to drive them as individuals into the community, had become no longer just a refuge but a clearing house. So Fanny Heland and Nancy Murray and all the other girls will soon come under pressure to leave Warangesda. Most, though, will refuse and the manager, unless he resorts to punishing them or their relatives by withholding their rations, will have no power to coerce them. If he manages to persuade any of the girls to leave what has been their home as well as their school, they probably will return soon, and he has no legal power to stop them.

It was the same at Brungle, the other big managed station in Wiradjuri country near Tumut. Though it had no dormitory, the Brungle manager also was required to persuade the girls to leave their families and offer themselves as domestic servants. In 1891 two girls sent to Junee to be house girls returned after a couple of months, even though they had supposedly been 'very kindly treated'.<sup>2</sup>

*'Put the People against the Manager'*

The manager's power even in the dormitory was more apparent than real, and declining. Earlier missionaries found that rewards of tobacco and food produced much better results than punishments. Flogging for theft or absconding had to be administered sparingly because the population would not tolerate it for long. When, in 1834, the missionary William Watson seized a child from its mother to carry off to the Wellington Valley dormitory, the next day there was not an Aboriginal in sight; the whole camp had dispersed in protest, anger and fear (Read 1988: 14–18). The Warangesda super-intendent, fifty years later, could not resort to kidnapping.

The manager's lack of power to enforce discipline was amplified amongst the adults. The superintendent could neither bribe nor coerce people to come to church, and two months after this incident in the dormitory, he abandoned the Wednesday night services in the hope that Sunday attendance would improve.<sup>3</sup> In matters secular,

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Victorian Kooris had learned that direct confrontation was not always the best method of opposing the managerial regime (Barwick 1998). By 1894 floggings at Warangesda were, from the manager's perspective, counter-productive, because the residents had learned, mainly from their Victorian kinfolk, that written complaints and organised deputations to government or newspapers could achieve far more than confrontation. Rather than rising in rebellion, they preferred to draw up a petition and send it to the Board. Go-slows, passive resistance and strikes were difficult weapons to beat. In 1883 Gribble had recorded an incident which would have been most unusual in the early years of Ramahyuck:

Strikes over the absence of flour or sugar were commonplace. General rebellion amongst men all this week. They want me to relax the working rule. As the government have granted a little money in aid, they think they have no right to work. These half-caste men are the ring-leaders. They have formed a deputation and have gone to Sydney to lodge a complaint.<sup>4</sup>

The men, according to Gribble, failed in Sydney, returned after a month, and were told to quit the mission if they could not obey the rules.<sup>5</sup> The fact that he readmitted them at all shows the weakness of his position. The superintendent needed labour. If he ejected the married men who formed the great majority of male adults, probably they would take their wives and the dormitory children with them. They would gather about the regional towns of Darlington Point, Narrandera or Junee and the residents of those towns would complain to the Protection Board who would in turn ask the manager to explain his expulsions. There was, at this time, no solution.

That was in 1883. Ten years later, at about the time of the dormitory confrontation, the manager tried to defeat a general strike by withholding all rations. The men went back to work, but two months later they went out again because there was no sugar. The Warangesda manager, whose station's configuration superficially resembled the classical Victorian disposition of authority and power in space, both failed to halt the traditional movement patterns established throughout Wiradjuri country for centuries, and, at this moment, failed to fully control the behaviour of those who chose to reside upon it.<sup>6</sup>

For institutional life always remained one of several options available to the Wiradjuri. The only people who could be generally counted upon to want to remain permanently at the institutions were Aboriginal older relatives, often women, who took European education seriously, but who found their children excluded from every school in the district. While it was true that a large number of Aboriginals gathered together fomented White prejudice, making it difficult to find work locally, the simplest thing to do if one was expelled was to camp at the unofficial reserve outside the station boundary. Here rations, news and family relations were conveniently maintained, and outside the manager's control. Here the disposition of Aboriginal space was maintained.

All the missions and stations had 'fringe camps' from their inception, but by the 1880s, the increasing and more articulate White populations were apt to complain

about them. Gribble regarded it a victory when he persuaded a single person to come from the camp to the mission.<sup>7</sup> Thirteen years later, in December 1896, the camps remained the same source of annoyance to the administration. The Local Board, which technically oversaw the manager's administration, ordered the Warangesda camp destroyed. If the order was carried out, the camp people merely moved somewhere else.<sup>8</sup> The problem had been latent in the managed institutions from the beginning. Ultimately the institutions could only remain a numerical success if the inmates could be *persuaded* that it was better to remain on them than off them. This the missionaries had signally failed to do. The problem was intractable: the Aboriginals, refusing to use the institutions as the sponsors intended, used them for their own purposes—as convenient stopping and living areas, within the traditional ambit, until there was a social, cultural or economic reason to go somewhere else. Such cross-purposes are evident in the establishment of Grong Grong reserve, near Narrandera. In 1891 James Gormley MLA, under pressure from his constituents, recommended that a reserve be opened on the Murrumbidgee River at Grong Grong. Reluctantly the Protection Board agreed—and was flooded with applications not from Narrandera Wiradjuri, but from those at Warangesda!<sup>9</sup>

*'Buckley Said'*

Only a single male appears in the extract, and he appears to be the manager's informer. Where are the others? Perhaps institutionalisation harmed men culturally more than women. The number of men to women on the managed stations was always disproportionate. Men could rarely be paid a living wage, and smaller stations with less arable land were even more unpromising as work places. At Brungle in 1898, hardly a single able-bodied man remained on the station.<sup>10</sup> Single men were never welcome; they symbolised or threatened disorder and insubordination. Their role as uncles or promised husbands or boyfriends was belittled whenever they were refused entry to school, dormitory or to the station itself. It happened frequently. The different managers' daily diary entries are preoccupied with confronting the unscheduled and unauthorised arrivals of young single men from the traditional living areas near Cowra, Brungle and Yass, and from the new towns of Hay, Narrandera, Gundagai and Jerilderie. In 1891 the manager noted that three men had left for Brungle; in August 1892 nine men and boys arrived from Yass looking for work; in December a Yass police inspector complained of two men 'just loafing from one mission to another'.<sup>11</sup> In March 1888 eight men left Warangesda and camped in the reserve in protest because, according to the manager, 'they were not allowed to associate with the girls when they pleased'.<sup>12</sup>

Is it not so surprising, then, that only a single male is mentioned? Is it significant that while the many women involved in the fracas are cheeky or defiant, the only male mentioned is the superintendent's informer? A first glance recognises these young men as happy-go-lucky rolling stones, wandering about the country in search of adventure. But it is clear that the managed stations were not the kind of venues to inculcate feelings of masculine self-confidence and self-worth even for those few who were allowed to

remain. It may be that the apparently carefree travel of those usually described derogatorily as 'idle young half-castes' was in part sponsored by insecurity and unemployment. The young men were peripatetic because they were wanted neither inside the stations nor in the workforce outside. The authoritarian and confrontational nature of the managerial structure left the men without a role, and diminished their sense of self-worth. Sociologists to the present have noted the dominance of Aboriginal women in management, administration and social issues.

*'Enceinte'*

Fanny Heland may or may not have been 'enceinte'. But plenty of children were born at Warangesda, and to a variety of parentage. Institutional births were crucial in twentieth century Aboriginal history. The dormitory girls knew Warangesda as their home; they knew no other. Already they were acculturated into that most central tenet of European culture: they recognised a permanent home. Simultaneously, they enjoyed a much reduced traditional education. Very few older Aboriginals (grandparents and great-uncles and great-aunts) lived on the station itself. If their fathers were skilled rural workers—shearers or drovers—they were generally forced to work far away from the Aboriginal centres if they wanted regular employment. Only their mothers and aunts, if anyone, could be expected to be in touch with them regularly.

After twenty years (that is, by 1900), Warangesda people were beginning to recognise this part of the river as their home. In the later decades of the nineteenth century, Jack Bamblett, by Koori tradition an Aboriginal from Newcastle, married the Gaelic-speaking Scot and Warangesda nurse Mary Cameron. Their children, mostly born at Warangesda, married either locally or into the extended families within their traditional walkabout. Their children cemented local relationships. One married Jack Ingram from Maloga, the Victorian mission station started by Daniel Matthews. Another married a woman from Darlington Point. A third married Sophie Wedge from Yass and a fourth married a man named Howell from the Macquarie River, again in Wiradjuri country. Many of the large Bamblett clan, today extending over much of Victoria and southern New South Wales, regard the Murrumbidgee River from Narrandera to Leeton as their first country as well as place of origin. Many other modern Wiradjuri families also, like the Charles, Edwards, Ingram, Kennedy and Kirby families are intimately linked to Warangesda, in the same way the Grosvenor, Williams and Freeman families are linked to Brungle. Obviously, their ancestors had existed as Aboriginals before the establishment of the station, but Warangesda functioned to protect, stabilise, educate and record.

*'Nancy Murray'*

At least one Aboriginal family name in the extract is significant. The Murrays, along with the Glasses and Coes, are regarded as one of the three founding families of Erambie station in Cowra, to which many of the Warangesda residents went after their own station was closed.<sup>13</sup> For the Bamblett of the Murrumbidgee and the Murrays of the

Lachlan at Cowra, the managed institution had acted both as catalyst and foundation stone for modern Wiradjuri extended families. In 1988 nine out of ten Wiradjuri individuals had a historical family connection with Warangesda mission (Read 1988: 46).

Association with a big managed station sometimes has meant the ultimate difference between identification and non-identification. While a field worker for Link-Up, I met with several people wishing to reclaim an Aboriginal identity by way of ancestors to whom their Aboriginal identity had been a matter of unconcern, ignorance or shame.<sup>14</sup> Some time in the last one hundred years, one or more ancestors had concealed an Aboriginal identity. But none had their family origins in Warangesda or Brungle. Warangesda residents, however else they may have thought about themselves, ultimately defined themselves as persons fundamentally different from Whites. The endless reiteration of dichotomy and division opposed any weakening of identity. Just as the children's homes at Cootamundra and Kinchela reinforced the consciousness of the inmates' Aboriginality, so the gathering together of Aboriginals in large numbers on the stations reinforced feelings of resentment and solidarity against Whites.

The pressures not to identify were all on the outside, and the history of another Warangesda family illustrates the temptations. Bill Ferguson, a White man, married an Aboriginal, Emily Ford, from Toganmain Station in 1872.<sup>15</sup> They lived at Waddi, in a fringe camp, for about two years. When Emily died in childbirth, the two boys Duncan and Bill were sent, despite the protests of their Aboriginal grandmother, to the Warangesda school. It is interesting to speculate on what might have happened had they not attended the school. Bill senior might at this point have easily left the district and married a White woman, and Bill junior, who was not very obviously Aboriginal in appearance, might then have grown up ignorant of or unimpressed by his Aboriginal ancestry and culture. It happened many times. But the boys did attend Warangesda Aboriginal school. Here their consciousness was reified, though probably not encouraged; they learnt whatever culture and language was available to them, they knew many of their extended family personally—and Bill junior grew up to become the famous William Ferguson, energetic activist and a member of the group of south-eastern Aboriginals who conceived the Day of Mourning.

*'All the Whites Were a Lot of Hypocrites'*

There is a significant point in that cheekily pertinent observation that the manager and all the other Whites were hypocrites. At Warangesda, and at all the managed institutions, the Aboriginals had learned to see the Whites en bloc just as the Whites had always seen them en bloc. They had entered the station as Wiradjuri clan members, Narrandera, Kutu-Mundra and Murrinballa (Howitt 1904: 56), and those from outside came as Ngemba or Joti Joti or Ngunnawal; but they lived within the station boundaries as Aboriginals. The managed institution, whatever the intentions of the management, cast people metaphorically if not literally into hostile camps. The solidarity of 'Us Christians' (never very firmly fixed in the missionaries' minds) soon became the divided

'us' and 'them'. The big mission stations reinforced and to an extent created the firm and united Aboriginal identity which the Protection Board was forced to confront throughout its seventy years of existence. In our quotation, a simple and childish row has developed into a stand-up confrontation between Nancy Murray and the manager. It would not have taken much to 'set all the Dormitory girls' against the manager. They were potentially, if not explicitly, against him already. Within a year of their arrival, the names of clan groups were vanishing rapidly into memory and the Wiradjuri were coming to identify themselves in the terms the Whites used—the new categories of 'Aborigines' and 'Blacks', and 'Half-Castes'.

*'A Chinese Looking Thing'*

Fanny Heland called Nancy Murray 'a Chinese looking thing'. Perhaps she was indeed of part-Chinese descent: Narrandera had a very large Chinese population in the 1880s. Warangesda contained many Aboriginals who were not of full descent. The managers and the entire administration were so obsessed with miscegenation that references to it permeated the everyday conversations of the station and found their way even into our quotation.

Let us suppose that Nancy Murray was indeed of Chinese/Aboriginal descent. It was only eight years since the Victorian Aborigines Protection Board had passed legislation to evict all Aboriginals of part descent from its reserves and stations, as if they had become, by legislative fiat, White people. Yet in Victoria, as in New South Wales, definitions did not match reality. Both to the Whites as much as to the Wiradjuri themselves, a part-Aboriginal man or woman was not White, whatever the law. All the station officials from first to last regarded part-Aboriginals, with their better formal education and knowledge of the workings of the White society, as potential challengers. They did their best to rid the station of them.

The only real power of expulsion they possessed was through the law against trespass: that is, if a superintendent declared a part-Aboriginal group to be 'non-Aboriginal', he could then charge them with trespass if they remained on the station. If the group then went to camp with their relatives at the Police Paddock, they might be charged with 'associating with Aboriginals'—in effect with living with their own family. However, the other Whites in the district would now object if this group, by every sensible definition Aboriginal, continued to live outside the officially designated Aboriginal station simply because the mission manager could not control them! By 1910 it was not just the single young men who were caught in this impossible no man's land; families also found themselves pushed and shoved by contradictory White demands. In that year four Aboriginal men, refusing to leave Brungle station, were prosecuted for trespass.<sup>16</sup> In the same year the Darlington Point Whites complained of Wiradjuri people, frightened of having their children forcibly removed, gathering around the town and camping by the river. The manager was directed to take them back again and to warn them that they were more likely, not less, to lose their children if they refused to return.<sup>17</sup>

*'A Sulky Looking Pig'*

The reported conversations were carried out, not in Wiradjuri, but in vernacular English. Managers objected to Aboriginal languages, sometimes because English was useful as a lingua franca, usually because they could not understand it, and always because the use of Wiradjuri was regarded as a serious impediment to acculturation. The children in the dormitory and the school learned English as their first language. They were the last of whom it could be said that they were reasonably proficient in Wiradjuri. The language on the managed stations was dying. The institutional structure encouraged it, the officials demanded it. Probably the adults living in the camps outside were unaware of the consequences of not speaking the language routinely and every day. It was amongst this first generation of dormitory girls and schoolroom boys that the fate of the Wiradjuri language was sealed. It was the most significant victory of the managed institutions.

**Future Implications**

Such were the implications embedded in the quotation. To conclude, let us leap forward thirty years (to 1924) to explore how the administration has resolved the tensions and weaknesses in the management and structure of the Aboriginal stations.

The religious management of the station was vanquished in 1897, only a few years after our confrontation in the dormitory. The state has won control of the stations from the voluntary and religious Aborigines Protection Association, and wins its own Act in 1909. By 1924, with the aid of that Act and two harsh amendments in 1915 and 1918, the state's Aborigines are in a far more vulnerable position. The managed reserves have fulfilled their ever-present potential to become unmanageable, and all the weaknesses and tendencies of the managed institution that we have noticed have been magnified and exposed. The Aborigines Protection Board has no answer beyond greater punitive force.

Parents continue to remove their children from the station while the girls themselves refuse to go into service. In 1899 two or three families leave Brungle for Cowra, and the Board, in an effort to have them returned, sues the parents for abducting their own children.<sup>18</sup> The officials are furious that magistrates may sometimes declare an Aboriginal child not to be within the legal definition of 'neglect'.

The Board's failure to persuade the girls to go into domestic service will be met with force. Through the Act and the 1915 Amendment, the state will grant itself the power to remove virtually any child it pleases. Of the 800 children removed from their communities in the period 1916–28, eighty-four will be Wiradjuri, seventy of them girls. Though the survivors were too old to give evidence to the 1995–96 Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families, it is these victims among the Stolen Generations who suffer the most.



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Institutional discipline has become much more coercive because the police, the health department, the judiciary and the Board have learned to cooperate. In 1916 the Warangesda manager is formally permitted to carry handcuffs and a pistol. Gambling, swearing, vagrancy (camping by the river) and disrespect for the manager are among the offences chargeable before a magistrate. The Board has met the problem of unwanted single men on its reserves by effectively declaring them, for the purposes of the Act, to be non-Aborigines. Circulars are sent around the stations containing the names of those proscribed—by 1920, 51 men have been expelled from Brungle, 41 from Warangesda.<sup>19</sup> The effects are catastrophic.<sup>20</sup>

Self-doubt, which perhaps had begun to affect Aboriginal men from the earliest days of the managed institutions and missions, continues to corrode their identity. In 1950 the Brungle manager reports that the men appear to be under the sway of the women, 'they let their wives set a standard to which they do not conform';<sup>21</sup> in 1995 Archie Roach writes his haunting, but devastating lyric, 'She's so tired of walking into doors'.<sup>22</sup>

In 1923 the Board is looking for assets to sell off to pay its debts. In July the Darlington Point police again complain of 'undesirables' around the town. On 17 October 1924 the Board decides to close Warangesda station forthwith. Almost exactly thirty years after the confrontation in the dormitory, the station is violently destroyed. Tradition holds that the last person to leave the station is Jim Turner, who nearly fifty years earlier came from Maloga mission with J.B. Gribble to establish the station. He is said to have defended his home at gunpoint until the roofs of the houses were pulled off. The dogs are destroyed, the large artefacts sold off and the broken remnants left for an archaeologist to investigate in 1995. The people, as they had to do seventy years earlier when a previous generation of mission stations failed, scatter to all points in Wiradjuri country and beyond. White farmers used the dormitory as a store and the church as a hay shed until they fell down, but the site has never again been occupied by Aboriginal people. The failure of the managed institutions precipitated the most hateful period for the Aboriginals of southern Australia in the whole of the 210 years of White occupation.