

# 6.

## Of Massacres, Missionaries, Myths and History Wars

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### **The Missionary as Hero**

In June 1926, a Western Australian police patrol of thirteen—twelve men and one woman — led by two young police constables, Graham St Jack and Denis Regan, set out to capture the Aborigines who, they believed, had killed Fred Hay, the soldier settler, co-owner of Nulla Nulla cattle station. Accompanying them were two special constables, sworn in for this patrol, three Aboriginal police trackers, two Aboriginal trackers added specially, Leopold Overheu, the soldier settler partner of Hay, as well as a friend of Hay, two other Aboriginal pastoral workers, and the wife of one of these men. The six white men were armed with .44 Winchester rifles and approximately five hundred rounds of ammunition, and the seven Aboriginal men with shotguns. The white members of the party also had side-arms.

Hay had, in fact, been killed by one Aboriginal, Lumbia, who was captured after an extensive search and tried, found guilty, and sentenced to death. Subsequently his sentence was commuted to life imprisonment after ABM had argued strongly that the sentence be reduced. Hay had actually provoked the attack. He was given permission to have sex with one of Lumbia's wives and had then tried to take her back to Nulla Nulla.

In the fight that ensued Hay was speared. His body was subsequently found, naked except for a pair of boots. Green refers to Hay's action as rape.<sup>1</sup>

In the months following the arrest of Lumbia, Ernest Gribble heard from Aborigines on the Marndoc Reserve, of which the Forrest River Mission was a small part, that the police party had murdered Aborigines. The rumours were recorded, when they were received, in the mission diary along with the mundane incidentals of life on the mission.<sup>2</sup> On 6 July, lay missionary John Thomson recorded that there had been an eyewitness account by an Aboriginal girl, Loorabane, of one brutal massacre of men, women and children. A local Aboriginal, Lily Johnson, translated her account for Thomson. Loorabane claimed the gunshot wound in her leg was from a police bullet as she and her brother fled the scene. In 1986, Lily Johnson told the story, as she remembered it, to Christine Halse, almost sixty years after Gribble had left Forrest River Mission.

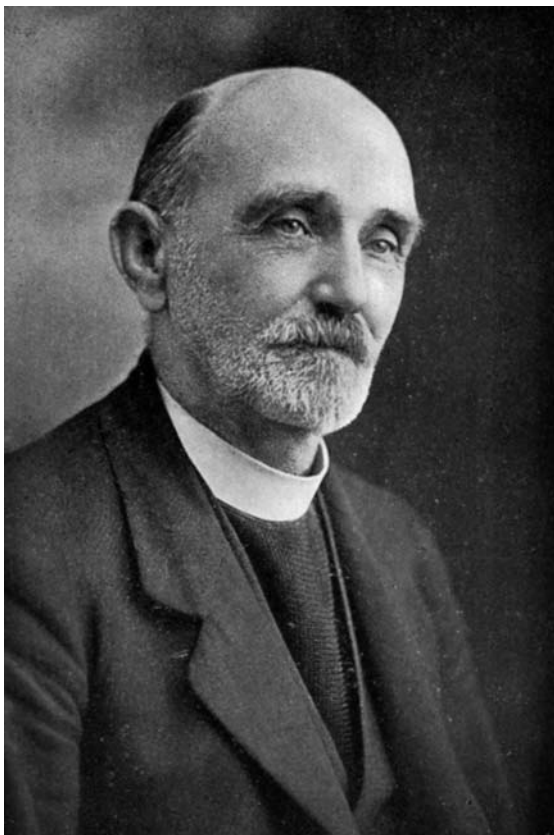
...the police got all those Aborigines from the Kular tribe that lived from the coast to the mission...they put the men on one chain and the women with their children and their kids on another chain. Some of those women had babes at the breast...they killed the men. They just lined them up and shot them one by one...the women had to watch those men being shot...their husbands and brothers and relatives... the men had to collect wood first. They didn't know why they had to collect that wood but they had to get a big pile of it...They lined them up and shot them...then they cut them up into pieces, you know, a leg, an arm, just like that and those bits of body were thrown on the wood...and burnt there...the women were taken to another place just a bit away...and had to stand on the river bank but it was dry that time of year and they were shot there so their bodies just fell into the river... they bashed the brains out of the babies and threw them into the river with their mothers and burnt the lot...there's a lot of bodies. It took a long time to burn...With the women was a mother and her two kids... they had bush names. They couldn't speak English...The boy's name [was] Numbunung (Kangaloo) and the girl was Loorabane...the boy spoke to his sister in language and told her that when that chain came off to grab mum and head for the bush...they were at the end of the chain...but [when they ran away] the police shot at them...they killed the mother and the girl got shot in the leg there [pointing]...they hid in the roots of the pandanus grass in the Forrest River. They hid under water and breathed through a bit of pandanus grass, you know, it's hollow, like a straw...the police looked for them everywhere but they just kept real still, not moving 'cause they were so scared...by evening, when they thought it was safe to leave, they moved out...swam across the Forrest River and travelled all the next day and then the day after

## White Christ Black Cross

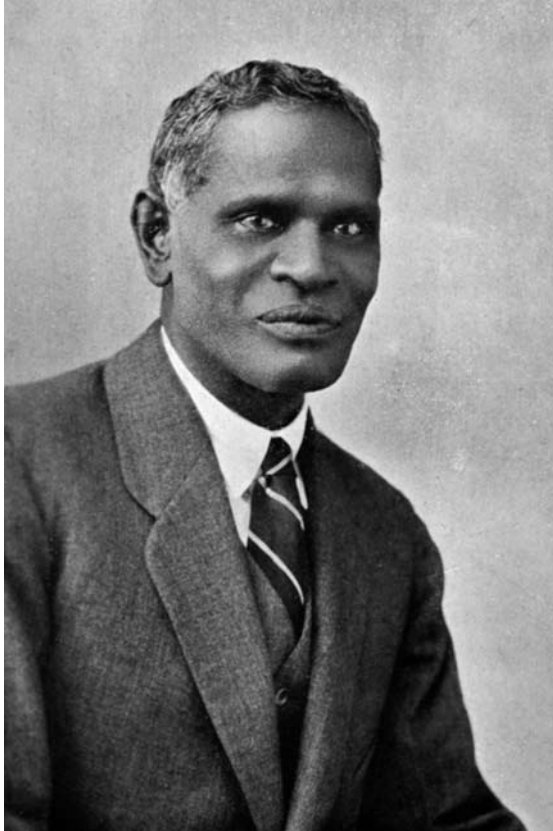
until the evening until they reached the mission where they knew they'd be safe...I was playing with the other girls...when Loorabane came...She was shaking with fright...She told us what happened and we told Mamma [Angelina Noble] and Mamma told Jim [Noble] and he told old Gribble.<sup>3</sup>

Kangaloo was able to name six Aborigines killed in this massacre, one of a number that occurred in the Marndoc Reserve. At each site the bodies were cut into small pieces, burnt, and any evidence carefully removed. This was how one Aboriginal remembered one of the massacres on the Marndoc Reserve sixty years after the event.

It was on 29 July 1926, two months after he heard the first rumours, that Gribble reported the matter to the Aboriginal inspector in Wyndham. He subsequently advised Western Australia's Chief Protector, AO Neville, the ABM secretary in Perth and the ABM chairman, John Needham, in Sydney.



*The Rev. Ernest Gribble was a pioneer missionary who exposed the 1926 Forrest River massacres and was the spark that set the History Wars on fire. From A Despised Race: The vanishing Aborigines of Australia, ER Gribble, Australian Board of Missions, 1933.*



*The Rev. James Noble was a pioneer missionary and the first Indigenous Australian to be ordained in the Anglican Church. He assisted Gribble in revealing the Forrest River Massacres. From A Despised Race: The vanishing Aborigines of Australia, ER Gribble, Australian Board of Missions, 1933.*

The investigating police inspector, William Douglas, reported to the police commissioner 'that sixteen natives were burned in three lots; one, six and nine; only fragments [of] bone not larger than one inch remain'. He also cautioned that it would be very difficult to convict anyone, especially as Gribble was so universally hated by the whites of the east Kimberley for his known antagonism towards them in general and the police in particular.<sup>4</sup>

It was also widely believed that Gribble was a disruptive presence among the Aborigines, as Walter Nairn, the lawyer representing the whites on the patrol, later informed the subsequent Royal Commission, and through it the press and public of Australia and overseas:

[he] treats them as the equal of whites. He continually puffs up blacks and has been a source of great mischief in the Wyndham district. That is why he is so cordially hated by those amongst whom he has lived for thirteen years.<sup>5</sup>

Gribble's life was threatened on two occasions because of the passions he inflamed and the fact that whites were having to defend themselves against the charge of conducting a punitive expedition against Aborigines who were seen as a threat to the lives and property of the pastoralists. Gribble won the reluctant support of the Anglican Church in Western Australia and the wholehearted commitment of ABM's chairman, John Needham, after a cautious appraisal of the situation.

The ensuing publicity in the Australian press and overseas in England and America was almost certainly critical to the establishment of the Royal Commission in 1927.

Senior Stipendiary Magistrate George Wood was appointed commissioner on 26 January 1927. He was highly respected, with an impressive public service record which included a period as Government Resident in Broome. He was then familiar with the people of the Kimberley and could be expected to understand the problems of living on this remote frontier. The white members of the police patrol were represented by a competent lawyer, Walter Nairn, as a result of a public subscription strongly supported by the settlers of the East Kimberley. The Forrest River Aborigines, the department representing Aboriginal interests, the witnesses supporting the allegations of murder, including Gribble, James Noble, other staff of Forrest River Mission, and the Aboriginal witnesses who could give evidence, were not provided with legal counsel. Nor was Commissioner Wood provided with independent legal support to assist him in his inquiries. It looked like a Royal Commission on the cheap, a Royal Commission the government had to have.

Wood reported that there was 'a conspiracy of silence' in the Kimberley. Witnesses retracted previous statements or refused to testify, or disappeared from the scene. A key witness, Tommy, was never seen again after a meeting with his employer, Leopold Overheu, his alleged murderer. Wood concluded that the white members of the patrol, including St Jack and Regan, had lied and orchestrated their testimonies.

Nairn set about discrediting the evidence and character of Ernest Gribble, the main witness against his clients and the person who was left to produce most of the other witnesses. And, there is no doubt that, in this, he was very successful. No one tried to get evidence from the large number of Aborigines who might have witnessed the police attacks or be related to people who had been killed. The Royal Commission had been limited in its investigation to the circumstances of Tommy's disappearance and to three particular sites where it was alleged massacres had taken place, a restriction Wood pointed out that could limit his findings. Marndoc Reserve was very large. Most of the skeletal evidence collected at these sites was assessed by two medical witnesses in Perth to be not human,

or not definitely human, although the medical officer in Wyndham had thought otherwise.

Wood submitted his report on 21 May 1927 to the Premier of Western Australia after having clearly taken into account all of the extensive evidence, including that specifically mentioned above. He concluded that the evidence of the whites in the patrol, including the journals of the constables, was fabricated. He reported that the police patrol had killed eleven Aborigines at the three sites his investigation was limited to, and then had burned the bodies. He concluded that there was no proof that Tommy had been murdered by Overheu. However, he specifically reported that four identified Aborigines had been murdered and burnt by the two police constables. Wood also warned that his conclusions were based on evidence he had considered during his four months' investigation. This was determined by 'the balance of probabilities', not 'beyond reasonable doubt', as would be required at a trial.

In 1968, Dr Helmut Reim of Karl Marx University in East Germany, now Leipzig University, interviewed three Aboriginal elders, and by an analysis of their testimonies, concluded that between eighty and one hundred Aborigines were killed in the massacres on the Marndoc Reserve. I have recently contacted Dr Reim who sent me the detailed transcript of the interview he gave in 1968 to Tony Thomas of the *West Australian*. I have attached this transcript as an appendix.

In 1968, Forrest River Aborigines reported that the massacres had occurred at five different sites. In his letter to me, Dr Reim referred to Peter Biskup's account in *Not Slaves, Not Citizens*, published by UQP in 1973, pp. 84–5, and to 'AO Neville's cautious statement (in his annual report to the Western Australian Parliament in 1927) on the findings of the Royal Commission: 'Anyone following the matter of these alleged murders carefully could only come to one conclusion, viz., that a number of natives had lost their lives in some untimely way'. Untimely indeed.

In the same year, Neville Green interviewed Charles Overheu who claimed that his brother, Leopold, had informed him that the party had shot over three hundred Aborigines. Gribble claimed that thirty of the regular visitors to the Forrest River Mission had been murdered. In 1926, the Aborigines of the Marndoc Reserve believed a large number had been killed by the police patrol and that is still the belief in that area. The members of the police patrol, of course, never admitted publicly to killing anyone.<sup>6</sup> I could not hazard a guess as to the correct estimate. However, I am convinced a massacre occurred.

The Solicitor-General decided to charge St Jack and Regan with the murder of one Aboriginal, Boondung, presumably as a test case. They were tried in the Magistrate's Court in Perth on 12–13 July and 10

August 1927. The case was bound to fail as defense lawyer Walter Nairn pointed out: ‘the evidence fails because there is no proof that Boondung, or anybody else, has been killed, nor is there any evidence from which that fact can be properly inferred’.

The magistrate discharged the accused because ‘the evidence was insufficient to justify its being placed before a jury’.<sup>7</sup> No further investigations were made and no other charges laid. Many Aborigines living on Marndoc Reserve who might have been able to give evidence were not interviewed. The government clearly wanted the matter put to rest.

After the Royal Commission, Gribble received numerous letters of congratulations from people and organisations concerned for Aboriginal advancement. This continued after St Jack and Regan were discharged. The ABM contacted the Premier of Western Australia, Phillip Collier, to express the board’s concern at the reinstatement of St Jack and Regan, and in the *A.B.M. Review*, 12 November 1927, publicly criticised this action and the court decision not to commit them for trial for murder. They had not been acquitted of the murder for which they had been charged, let alone the others.<sup>8</sup>

This story of the missionary as martyr became the faith of the Anglican Church, at least the few who were interested in Aborigines and Aboriginal missions, and of people throughout Australia interested in Aboriginal advancement. It was also accepted and promulgated by academics before the publication of Green’s *The Forrest River Massacres* in 1995 and Halse’s biography, *A Terribly Wild Man* in 2002.<sup>9</sup>

### The Missionary as Monster

I thought I had completed my research on the Forrest River massacres almost a decade ago. I had wanted to explore how twentieth century Australians reacted to the well-publicised reality of contemporary frontier conflict leading to the imposition of white dominance and the dispossession of Aborigines who were standing in the way of ‘progress’, that is, Aborigines who were impeding colonisation. How did we white Australians, who were the passive beneficiaries of the violent dispossession of Aborigines in the nineteenth century, respond when the ugly reality that had produced our comfortable lifestyle re-emerged as a twentieth century reality? No longer was it a matter of a regrettable past, better forgotten, but a present reality again perpetrated on black Australian citizens. How did an aware Christian majority, in this case the Anglican Church, respond? More particularly, how did the conscience of this Christian majority committed to the welfare and souls of these black Australians respond, in this case ABM? As with the Mabo decision<sup>10</sup> and subsequent government