

AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND IDENTITY: (WILL THE REAL REVEREND GRIBBLE PLEASE STAND UP?)

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The Reverend Ernest Richard Bulmer Gribble is a significant figure in the history of Australian missions and race relations.¹ During his sixty-five years as an Anglican missionary to the Australian Aborigines, Gribble had a dramatic impact on the lives and destinies of thousands of indigenous people on both sides of the continent - providing many with their first experience of Christianity and Western culture. He pioneered Yarrabah Mission near Cairns, Queensland (1893-1909); was Warden of Fraser Island Mission, near Maryborough, Queensland (1900-1904); established the Mitchell River Mission on the Gulf of Carpentaria (1903-05); pioneered Forrest River Mission, near Wyndham in Western Australia (1914-1928), and was the first Anglican Chaplain of the government Aboriginal settlement of Palm Island, off the Queensland coast near Townsville (1930-1957).

Until Gribble, the history of missionary endeavour to the Aborigines was a history of failure. Gribble's work at Yarrabah seemed to reverse this pattern. In less than a decade, he established a well populated community of Europeanised converts - a development which Church leaders considered exceptional:

Before Mr Gribble started his work the blacks were living as savages; now there [sic] were leading sober, respectable lives in houses erected by themselves and kept scrupulously clean. They worked year in and year out to support their families, and there [sic] appearance showed no tendency to break back to savagedom ... It was one of the most remarkable instances of successful mission work in modern times.²

As a result, Gribble became the Anglican Church's resident authority on missionary work with Aborigines. He tutored its missionaries and was the model for its missionary work until well into the 1930s. Even other denominations were influenced by Gribble. Staff from Mapoon, Weipa, Cape Bedford and Bloomfield River Missions all visited

Yarrabah to study his methods.

So why did someone so apparently successful who had such extensive influence on the history of Australian missions feel the need to write six books detailing his life's story?

The answer lies in the timing of Gribble's writing. All his books were produced immediately after pivotal career crises. The first book, *The Life and Experiences of an Australian* was written after he was dismissed from his position as Superintendent of Yarrabah Mission amidst allegations of mismanagement and sexual immorality. The next four books, *Forty Years with the Aborigines* (Angus and Robertson, 1930), *The Problem of the Australian Aborigines* (Angus and Robertson, 1932), *A Despised Race* (ABM, 1933) and *Over the Years* were written after a torrid term as the Head of Forrest River Mission. During this period, Gribble alienated most Western Australians by helping force a Royal Commission into the 1926 massacre of Aborigines on the Marndoc Reserve; he was repeatedly reprimanded by the Church for mis-managing Forrest River, and finally dismissed after he deliberately concealed evidence from police to protect a mission 'favourite' incriminated in a murder investigation. In 1930, Gribble was appointed Chaplain to Palm Island. He begrudgingly accepted the post and began his final autobiography - tellingly entitling it *The Setting Sun*. Set against these career crises, Gribble's books clearly appear as an attempt to shape the public record of his life and work.

Five images of Gribble reoccur in his writings: the successful missionary; Aboriginal expert; messianic leader; enlightened egalitarian, and bushman. Given Gribble's motives for writing, how accurate are his autobiographies as a record of historical fact - especially when juxtaposed against his own unpublished records and the recollections of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal informants?

Successful Missionary

At the turn of the century, the Australian Board of Missions, the Anglican Church's missionary arm, had a clear vision of a successful mission. It was a prosperous, well populated community of sincere, Europeanised converts. For Gribble, recognition as a successful missionary was important. But did he fulfil the ABM's criteria for success? Few Aborigines voluntarily adopted mission life. Most were

forcibly reallocated by the police or joined his mission only when the invasion made it impossible to survive elsewhere. Many only stayed as long as the food and tobacco lasted.

Those living within the mission underwent the required religious rites but many led a dual existence - giving token adherence to Christianity while maintaining allegiance to their own culture. At Yarrabah, despite Gribble's efforts, traditional customs continued. Converts absconded to attend corroborees, persisted in using their native languages, and secretly conducted initiation ceremonies and mourning rites. In the year before his departure, Gribble was still complaining of trouble with "silly old blackfellow things".³

The pattern was similar at Forrest River. Most baptised men only stayed for a few months before leaving to find wives or fulfil traditional marriage obligations, and Gribble had to depose five of his most trusted 'converts' for participating in circumcision rites. Since none of the missionaries spoke language and few 'converts' knew more than a little English, Aborigines' understanding of Anglican Christianity must be suspect.

Even at Palm Island, where Gribble's conversion rate was largest, his assistant, Father Hubbard accused him of being obsessed with numbers and baptising adults "without adequate preparation".⁴ Certainly many Aborigines remember that they only attended services because they were herded into church by Gribble's dog!

Authority on Aborigines

What about Gribble's identity as an authority on Aborigines? All his books functioned as vehicles for expounding his views on Aborigines and his opinion that segregation, conversion, and Europeanisation alone would save the Aboriginal race. Gribble valued his position as the Church's authority on Aborigines. It was an integral component of his self-image. The priority he placed on it is reflected in the title pages of *The Problem of the Australian Aborigines* and *Despised Race*:

Pioneer missionary to Yarrabah, North Queensland; Mitchell River, North Queensland; and Forrest River, North Australia; Protector of Aborigines, Queensland, for sixteen years and Protector of Aborigines, Western Australian, sixteen years.

But how knowledgeable was Gribble of Aboriginal culture? He wrote twelve items about Yarrabah's cultures for the *Australasian Anthropological Journal* and the *Science of Man* but most contributions consisted of a single point or sentence and, according to linguist R.M.W. Dixon, many were erroneous. After six weeks with Gribble at Forrest River Mission, anthropologist and fellow clergyman Dr A.P. Elkin also concluded that Gribble knew nothing of Aboriginal customs, culture or languages.⁵

Gribble's least apparently autobiographical work is *The Problem of the Australian Aborigines* of which nearly half is devoted to detailing aspects of Aboriginal culture. But the coincidental timing cannot be ignored. It was written shortly after Elkin condemned him for his ignorance of Aboriginal culture. Gribble's aim was to rebut Elkin's criticisms and entrench himself as an authority on Aborigines. Yet Gribble's 1929 journal shows that all the cultural and language information he collected at Forrest River was gathered after Elkin's attack. Moreover, his knowledge of the cultures around his missions was so scant that he had to draw on other sources to compile his accounts. In fact, Gribble had little regard for Aboriginal culture. He considered Aborigines a "degraded and depraved race" and dismissed their culture as mere "superstition".⁶

Messianic Leader

The third reoccurring image in Gribble's autobiographies is of the benevolent leader who attracted and controlled Aboriginal people by the sheer force of his personality. His reports described the increasing numbers attracted to his missions, the rapt attention paid to his sermons and his tremendous personal popularity with Aborigines.

Such claims clash with the evidence that Gribble relied on forced removals and births for population growth on his missions, and that large numbers of Aborigines found mission life so unbearable that they absconded at any opportunity. At Forrest River, Aborigines were bribed to abduct children from the bush to "make up the numbers at the Mission" and parents were refused food and tobacco if they did not hand over their children.⁷ Resentment of Gribble's actions was so intense that some women aborted pregnancies rather than bear children to be appropriated by the mission.⁸ Since all girls were married soon after puberty (as young as twelve years of age) Elkin christened Forrest River Mission "Gribble's stud-farm".

There are more blatant examples. Gribble's description of his 1904 journey to Mitchell River Mission, stresses his immediate control over the local Aborigines: the corroboree which ceased immediately at his suggestion; the respectful silence of hundreds of Aborigines who listened attentively when he spoke etc. Such scenes were designed to evoke images of control and authority - impregnated with racist overtones of the lone white man whose charismatic powers enable him to control hundreds of coloured natives.

Gribble equated himself with biblical prophets like John the Baptist - as his description of a baptism at Mitchell River illustrates :

The wild blacks, over two hundred in number, stood on the bank of the lagoon...We Christians, seven in number, four whites and three blacks stood near the water. I entered the stream and the two candidates came from their tribe came to me in the middle of the water, where I baptised them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Bendigo took the name of Peter and Grady the name of John, the first two baptised on the new mission.⁹

Gribble's messianic self-image pervaded all facets of his missionary work. At Forrest River, he stocked the mission reserve with sheep and cattle - with devastating consequences for the local Aborigines. Spirit centres and water sources were polluted; sacred sites trampled, and native foods consumed. Aborigines retaliated by killing the stock but Gribble worked hard to foster the perception that his personal authority prevented the attacks which blighted other pastoralists. Claiming that stock was not killed if "aborigines thought they belonged to the Mission", Gribble never reported the mission's losses. Instead, he punished cattle killers in secret at the mission.¹⁰

In 1925 when Aborigines killed and wounded about eighty of the mission's cattle herd, Gribble insisted that the killers were "strangers to the mission" who only attacked the cattle because of "rumours [he] had left district". Persisting with the charade of total dominion, he described in *Forty Years*, how he subdued the cattle-killers by deluding them that a leg of mutton in his saddlebag was actually a rifle. Gribble did not publicise what he confided to his journal: that mission residents not only partook of the beef but that his "most trusted stock boy...rounded up the cattle [and gave] the bush natives a beast to kill". Obviously, such a revelation would seriously jeopardise the messianic image which Gribble strove so diligently to cultivate.

Enlightened Egalitarian

Gribble's autobiographies leave his readers with the impression that he was a tolerant man, committed to Aborigines, anxious to improve their position and patient with their efforts to accommodate a changing world order. His writing abounds with anecdotes about Aboriginal responses to Christianity. He cites, for example, the confusion caused by hymns such as 'Shall we gather at the River?'. Reflecting the temporal concerns of mission life, Aborigines mistook the words "We will walk and worship forever" as "We will work and wash-up for ever". Similarly, after several children were punished for pilfering from the mission plantation, the petition "And lead us not into temptation" from the 'Lord's Prayer' was recast to become "Lead us not into the plantation".¹¹

But Gribble was neither tolerant or patient. Aborigines who resisted his authority were whipped publicly with his leather strap. Others were punished by having a cross shaved through their hair or being forced to stand barefoot on a tin roof in the hot sun. Some endured solitary confinement in the mission's gaol. Nor did Gribble balk from physically punching mission staff who questioned his authority. Chairman Needham of the ABM observed that Gribble:

will not listen to any suggestion from anyone. A consultation of the staff is only a sham, none would dare to express an opinion if thought to be unacceptable to him. It would be met with the same old remark "I have had thirty-six years" experience, and I know.¹²

Consequently, missionaries were reluctant to work with Gribble. The problem became so serious that the Bishop of North Queensland issued a public appeal "Is there a Priest anywhere who wants to go and work with Gribble?".¹³ Nor was Gribble wholly committed to principles of egalitarianism in his dealings with Aborigines. He believed that Aborigines "possessed...a degree of intelligence by no means low", but was often surprised by their achievements because they were "only Australian Aborigines". He was determined to "Europeanise the Natives" because he believed that it was the only way they could "attain to a higher state of life".¹⁴

Even Gribble's more notable achievements were tainted by such ethnocentrism. At Palm Island he established a scheme to finance the

secondary education of promising Anglican children - a remarkable move in an era when education on Aboriginal reserves stopped at Grade 4. But Gribble never saw education as a means of empowering Aboriginals to access economic affluence, mainstream employment or equality within an unsegregated society. His intention was to train them "for future usefulness amongst their own people...on Aboriginal missions and Settlements" where they would "fill many subordinate positions on the staff" under the supervision of "white officials".¹⁵

Bushman

Gribble devoted considerable space in his autobiographies to detailing his experiences as a drover, bushman and sailor. He presents a picture of expertise resplendent in the glorification of masculinity, mateship, the pioneering spirit and the subjugation of nature. Man's primeval battle against nature's unruliness provided a physical parallel to the spiritual battle for the soul which defined his role as a missionary. In the mould of Livingstone, Gribble's descriptions romanticise him as a hero who fearlessly confronted danger to take Christianity and "civilisation" to the "heathen" Aboriginal.

There is some truth in this image. As a pioneering missionary Gribble battled the full gamut of nature's vagaries and experienced a level of deprivation and hardship that few would voluntarily undergo. But he was not the archetypal bushman. He justified his ventures into cattle and sheep rearing at Forrest River on the basis of his expertise as "an old stockman"- a gross misrepresentation. He had less than eighteen months experience as a stockman/drover before adopting missionary life - a fact which was evident when all of his ventures with stock failed to return a profit. Nor was Gribble the expert seaman he claimed. In Cairns, it was conventional wisdom that he never learned "the knack of keeping craft seaworthy or afloat" and that his standard technique for coming into the wharf was "all sails up and anchor down".¹⁶ Even forty years later when Gribble personally selected and purchased a launch for St Georges Mission, Palm Island, marine experts found it so unsafe that it had to be sold.¹⁷

Exclusion

The most striking feature of Gribble's autobiographical writing is the exclusion of virtually all personal details about his life. Little mention is made of his wife or three sons. Certainly, there is no mention of his affair with a married Aboriginal woman and the birth of their daughter - the incident which precipitated his dismissal from Yarrabah mission. Similarly, Gribble documents the contributions of other family members in the missionary field but does not mention their more intimate involvement with mission residents : his brother's alleged rape of a married girl in her mid-teens; and his sister's affair, pregnancy and subsequent marriage to a Batjala man. Such exclusions are particularly ironic given that, until his death in 1957, Gribble was one of the Church's most outspoken opponents of miscegenation!

Qualifications

In fairness, Gribble was not solely responsible for all the misrepresentations in his autobiographies. His work was sometimes heavily edited and the restrained, moderate tone of his publications does not reflect the torrid spirit or writing style of the real man. For instance, Gribble drafted a twenty-two page description of the events surrounding the 1926 massacre but the editors of *Despised Race* reduced this to a mere two sentences:

Then, in 1926, complaints were made to the police of the natives killing cattle on the station, and a party of police were sent round to investigate. This led to the awful atrocities, which caused a Royal Commission to be appointed.¹⁸

Implications

There is only a tenuous contention between Gribble's autobiographical writing and the true story of his life. Gribble used his writing to reconstruct reality according to his own version of events and to create the heroic image he wanted preserved for posterity. He sought to establish a flattering portrait for public consumption which ignored the less savoury truths of the private man. Gribble's autobiographies were

not a forum for honest documentation but a vehicle for selectively recording the image he wanted history to record. They are corrupted accounts driven by self-interest. They were his means of creating a new identity.

Unfortunately, historians and other writers have uncritically accepted Gribble's version of himself. Randolph Stow used Gribble as the basis of his sympathetic missionary portrait in *To the Islands*; Paul Smith idealises Gribble as a visionary in his history of Yarrabah; Noel Loos sees him as an exemplar of his class; John Harris treats him with reverence in his study of Australian missions, and Neville Green portrays him as a courageous, lone defender of Aboriginal rights.¹⁹ Because writers have failed to compare and reconcile Gribble's accounts with other, less prejudiced sources, Gribble has assumed an unwarranted mythological proportion in much of the literature.

In the climate of national introspection which has accompanied the Republican and Native Title debates, it is timely to re-assess the impact of missionaries such as Gribble for they had considerable influence on the construction of Australian identity and race relations history. Unless we develop a complete and honest understanding of our past, clear directions for the future cannot evolve, but it must be an analysis unblinkered by the biases of sometimes questionable sources such as autobiographies.

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