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A SCOTTISH INHERITANCE? MARY BENNETT, THE ABORIGINAL CAUSE AND THE LEGACIES OF THE PAST

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MARY Montgomerie Bennett (1881–1961) was a leading twentieth century advocate for Aboriginal human rights. Her advocacy has been explored in the context of Christian reformism, feminism and humanitarianism.¹ In this paper, I look towards her Scottish origins—and her family—as a way of exploring her extraordinary commitment to this cause. While mapping out the terrain of her advocacy I show how her family story is crucial, including its Scottish roots, and argue that her Scottish inheritance is evident in her attitudes on the question of ‘race’ and racial justice, as well as her teaching of Indigenous students and her unswerving faith.

In the historiography of the Scots in Australia, Mary Bennett doesn’t rate a mention.² There are several possible reasons for this including the male bias of the historiography, until recently, as well as a preoccupation with the nineteenth century. Indeed, Bennett’s father, Robert Christison, is usually mentioned in the cast of prominent Scottish squatters in such works. On the other hand, her

¹ Alison Holland, *Just Relations: The Story of Mary Bennett’s Crusade For Aboriginal Rights* (Perth: UWA Publishing, 2015); Alison Holland, “‘Whatever Her Race, a Woman is not a Chattel’: Mary Montgomerie Bennett”, in Anna Cole et al. (eds), *Uncommon Ground: White Women in Aboriginal History* (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2005), pp. 129–152; Marilyn Lake, *Getting Equal: The History of Australian Feminism* (St Leonards: Allen and Unwin, 1999), pp. 110–136.

² Malcolm Prentis, *The Scots in Australia: A Study of New South Wales, Victoria and Queensland, 1788–1900* (Sydney: Sydney University Press, 2008); Don Watson, *Caledonia Australis: Scottish Highlanders on the Frontier of Australia* (Sydney: Collins, 1984); T. M. Devine (ed.), *Scottish Emigration and Scottish Society* (Edinburgh: John Donald, 1992); Fred Cahir et al (eds), *Scots Under the Southern Cross* (Ballarat: Ballarat Publishing, 2014).

Scottishness has not been a preoccupation of feminist historiography, where considerable interest has been shown in her.³ Indeed, feminist historiography has generally been less interested with the ethnic roots of the cause in Australia than with other questions such as class and race. There have certainly been some excellent studies of women and religion in Australian history but feminist treatment of Scottish women has focused on women of fame such as Catherine Helen Spence, Rose Scott and Mary Gilmore.⁴ While emphasizing the importance of family to her story, my body of work on Bennett has not focused on her Scottishness till now.⁵

Added to these historiographical issues is the relative infancy of studies in Scottish relations with Aborigines. In a notable response to Bob Reece who penned a piece in *Quadrant* highlighting the close connections between the Irish and the Aborigines, Malcolm Prentis explored important historical connections between the Scots and Aborigines, cataloguing both brutal and conciliatory explorers and settlers, and noting many Scottish names associated with campaigns for justice.⁶ While Bennett and her father are notably absent from this list, in thinking through the 'Scottish-Aboriginal amalgam', Prentis sites intermarriage, the Scottish being 'no respecter of persons', belief in the 'Fatherhood of God and Brotherhood of man',

³ Alison Holland, *Just Relations and Whatever Her Race; Lake, Getting Equal; Fiona Paisley, Loving Protection? Australian Feminism and Aboriginal Women's Rights* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2000).

⁴ See Anne O'Brien, *God's Willing Workers: Women and Religion in Australia* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2005); Sabine Willis (ed.), *Women, Faith and Fetes: Essays in the History of Women and the Church in Australia* (Melbourne: Australian Council of Churches, 1977); Susan Magarey, *Unbridling the Tongues of Women: A Biography of Catherine Helen Spence* (Adelaide: University of Adelaide Press, 1985); Judith Allen, Rose Scott: *Vision and Revision in Feminism 1880-1925* (Australia and New Zealand: Oxford University Press, 1994); Suzanne Fabian and Morag Loh, *The Changemakers: Ten Significant Australian Women* (Queensland: Jacaranda Press, 1983).

⁵ Holland, *Just Relations*.

⁶ Malcolm Prentis, 'The Scots and the Aborigines', *Quadrant* 42 (June 1998), pp. 37-42.

evangelicalism and humanitarianism as important themes. More recently Prentis explains Scottish 'success' on the Australian frontier, particularly in terms of settling the land, as agricultural expertise spawned by the agricultural revolution, an educated class imbued with Calvinist values, as well as the capacity for adaptability and experimentation and a 'hardy persistence which thrived in adverse conditions'.⁷

Putting more flesh on our understanding of Scottishness and race, Don Watson has argued that there were three types of Scottish squatters: those who understood that, in dispossessing the Aborigines, they had a duty of care to them; those who believed that their right to settle was premised on the eradication of them and those who combined murder with kindness.⁸ More recently still, in a collection of essays on the theme of 'Scots in Australia', three chapters are dedicated to the theme.⁹ These essays explore connections between Scots and Aboriginal people in different locations and contexts. Here we see intercultural interaction on the frontier as well as Aboriginal memory-making/commemoration of Scottish explorers. In terms of thinking through specific connections between Scottishness and attitudes to Aborigines Ian Clark's study of Colin and Frances Campbell's relationships with the Djabwurrung people of the Buangor District in Victoria where they squatted from the 1840s draws some interesting conclusions.¹⁰ He notes both violence and conciliation, Aboriginal labour and loyalty, his wife's attempts at civilizing the people and their incorporation of the Campbells into their clan organization. While education appears to have been important in the Campbells' respect for Aboriginal culture, Clark

⁷ Prentis, *Scots in Australia*, p. 101.

⁸ Watson, *Caledonia Australis*, p. 169.

⁹ Cahir et al., *Scots*, p. 23–52.

¹⁰ Ian D. Clark, 'Colin and Frances Campbell and their relationships with the Djaburrung Aboriginal People of the Buangor District, 1840–1903', Cahir, et al., *Scots*, pp. 23–32.

also notes the mix of Christianity, evangelicalism and humanitarianism in their relationships with the local clans.

All of these studies and conclusions are very pertinent to Bennett's story, as well as the related story of her father, more widely known. If the characteristics variously catalogued are attributable to her Scottishness then she and her father, in particular, carried them all. In his pioneering on the land and in relation to his treatment of the Aborigines, Robert Christison embodied the resilient, educated, adaptable Scot, hard-working and tenacious. As I show in my biography of Bennett, he also embodied the twin characteristics of autocracy and benevolent paternalism characteristic of Watson's typology. And, if there was one key word to describe Mary Bennett, it would have to be persistent. Here, I would like to claim enlightenment as another key attribute which relates to both her Scottishness and her family. This aspect of Scottishness in Australia has been much less of a focus, despite a widespread acknowledgement of evangelicalism and humanitarianism underpinning some Scottish settlers relations with Aboriginal people.

John Gascoigne's work is a notable exception.¹¹ In his study of the enlightenment and the origins of European Australia Gascoigne posits that the enlightenment both overlapped and disrupted English and Scottish religious beliefs. He notes the importance of the enlightenment as a kind of antidote to catastrophic social and political upheaval and its philosophical underpinnings in ideas of human perfectability, improvement and environmental causality. While education was important, so too, were growing ideas about universal rights and legal equality. Of course, Gascoigne's study is not specifically focussed on the Scottish enlightenment, yet we can see in Bennett's commitment to the power of enlightenment (education, in particular) as well as legal and institutional reform and

¹¹ John Gascoigne, *The Enlightenment and the Origins of European Australia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

human development three currents from the liberal Calvinist expression of the movement.¹²

* * *

In the Christison family papers in the John Oxley library in Queensland is a short letter written from Robert, the patriarch of the family and Mary Bennett's father, to his wife, Mary's mother. It is dated 23 March 1889 and he writes:

Hope you got over your sea sickness... How nice it would have been if I had been with you. Your image on the quarter deck and dear Mimi's bonny little face looking through the porthole are rarely out of my mind's eye. What a strange loveable little thing she is, whenever my eyes met hers she withdrew herself and then peep peeping out.¹³

'Mimi' was Mary Bennett's affectionate family name—a contraction of Mary Montgomerie—and possibly a means of differentiating her from her mother, also Mary. This vignette relates to a constant feature of Christison family life in the late nineteenth century and, thus, Bennett's childhood. By 1889 Robert Christison was owner of a vast pastoral empire in Queensland's northern hinterland which he called Lammermoor, after the hills of his birthplace, Foulden, in Berwickshire, Scotland.¹⁴ He was sent to Australia in 1852, at the age of just 15 with his brother, Tom, aged 16 to 'sink or swim', as Mary Bennett later described it, in Victoria. After a series of odd jobs mostly on sheep stations and an attempt at gold digging it was exploring that began to appeal. While he attempted to join the party of Burke and Wills he eventually struck out on his own and by the early 1860s embarked for Bowen then the furthest northern part of

¹² Jonathan Israel, *Democratic Enlightenment: Philosophy, Revolution, and Human Rights 1750–1790* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 233–269.

¹³ Robert Christison to Mary Christison, 23 March, 1889, Robert Christison Papers: M. M. Bennett Collection, John Oxley Library, OMR 39, Box 9569.

¹⁴ M. M. Bennett, *Christison of Lammermoor* (London: Alston Rivers, 1927).

Queensland. Once there he bought supplies and with the help of Gailbury, his 'blackboy', ventured West. By 1866 he established himself on fine country, the tall trees and watercourses around the Barcoo and Thomson rivers, about three hundred miles west of Bowen. Lammermoor became a vast cattle empire which supported himself and his family, as well as a host of Aboriginal labourers, a string of residences in the south which his wife and children would retire to in the summer and, eventually, a huge country estate—Burwell Park, in Lincolnshire—where Christison retired around the turn of the century.

As it turns out, Mary's mother, Christison's second wife, did not like living at Lammermoor so Mary's childhood, along with that of her sister and brother, was punctuated by moving from place to place with her mother, aunts, grandmothers and various carers between Lammermoor and the southern residences and between Australia and England. There are several letters between her father and mother and between herself and her siblings and their father in the family papers. They demonstrate a deep love and a very loving, but absent, father and husband who, as the above vignette suggests, left a profound impression on Mary, his eldest daughter who was born in England in 1881. It was not until she sat down to go through his papers, not long after his death, in 1915, in her mid thirties, that she would stop 'peep peeping' and come to appreciate the man who, by dint of circumstance, she had been prevented from fully knowing until after his death. Her biography of him, *Christison of Lammermoor*, published in 1927 is a loving tribute to her father as a pioneer. It is also a tribute to his benevolent relationship with the Dalleburra—the Indigenous people whose country he occupied.

This was no accident for it was around this time, too, that Bennett threw herself into the Aboriginal cause. Against the backdrop of a vibrant interwar imperial humanitarianism she became a leading contributor to Britain's conversation about the fate of colonized peoples throughout its empire, then very much in vogue. By the 1920s, childless, in the middle of her life and recently widowed, the Aboriginal cause became her *raison d'être*. It would fill the void left by the relative quick succession of deaths of key family members: her father in 1915; mother in 1922, and her husband in 1927, and her alienation from the rest of her family for the rest of her life. Indeed, she would come to live, sleep and breath the cause, quite literally until her last breath. Her crusade took different forms from travel to missionary style educative work, to advocacy, to welfare assistance, to

representing Aboriginal claims in courts and elsewhere, to lobbying politicians both in Australia and abroad, to feeding and looking after her Aboriginal friends, to creating dossiers and case studies of their claims, to prolific writing in their defence and donation, including a hospital on the mission where she worked. Her crusade would see her live on the edges of the Great Victoria Desert in Western Australia for ten years, move back to England during the second world war to advance their claims in the heart of empire, return to work among the Wongutha on the very edges of the desert on the Western/South Australian border, share her house and food with Aboriginal people in Kalgoorlie and produce volumes of letters, reports and dossiers in the cause.

It would see her clash, often rather dramatically and vehemently, with leading politicians and bureaucrats, the most distinctive being her fight with A. O. Neville, the Chief Protector in Western Australia and key advocate for the biological absorption of Aboriginal people in the interwar years. It would see her suffer physically in the cause; a diabetic, she had bouts of ill-health and exhaustion while prosecuting her case. It would see her write reports and papers which were aired in the heart of the empire and led to sensational frontline news both here and in England, one of which—on the fate of the Aboriginal mother in 1933—ultimately precipitated a Royal Commission on Aboriginal conditions in Western Australia. It would see her write to international organizations, such as the International Labour Organisation and the International Federation of Free Trade Unions, and it would see her become part of a global anti-colonial discourse and share her concerns with the likes of Harold Moody, of the League of Coloured Peoples in England, and Reverend Michael Scott, British anti-apartheid activist and campaigner for African reform in the United Nations. Finally, and most significantly, it would see her life's work confiscated at the moment of her death by agents of the Western Australian state.

By any measure hers was an extraordinary life and an extraordinary crusade. That we do not know about her as a leading twentieth century advocate for Aboriginal people is not particularly surprising given the fact that there is no celebration or appreciation of struggles for Aboriginal rights in the public sphere in Australia as there are in the United States, Canada, New Zealand and South Africa, comparative settler-colonial sites with similar histories. But her story is also about the relationship between England and Australia at a formative period of both histories, it is about the

Scottish diaspora, it is about women advocates and humanitarians and it is also about settler-colonialism, a particular historical dynamic which undergirds the Australian story and indeed her story in particularly profound ways.¹⁵ As already intimated, the question with which I am concerned is not why we do not know about her but how we explain her extraordinary commitment to the Aboriginal cause. A good place to start is with her father, Lammermoor and the Dalleburra.

In an otherwise conventional biography of pioneer and place three chapters in the middle of her biography of her father, *Christison of Lammermoor*, published in 1927, are dedicated to the theme of Aboriginal governance, past policy and treatment which, she maintained, displayed a deadly continuity in the present.¹⁶ As Robert Gray, a fellow north Queensland pioneer and friend of Christison's, wrote in the foreword to the book, they make for 'painful reading'.¹⁷ However, it is also in these chapters that we read of Robert Christison's relationship with the tribes against a very bleak canvas of race relations in the north. Christison, so Mary relays, was an exception for, unlike most settlers in the region who relied on the native police to eradicate Aborigines from the land they wished to occupy, Christison made a compact with them. Capturing an Aboriginal man he subsequently named Barney, he apparently proclaimed: 'you and me sit down two fellow messmates. Country belonging to you; sheep belonging to me'.¹⁸

This seemed to work as members of the Dalleburra, a tribe of between three and five hundred people came in to Christison's station to work and live in the huts he built for them in the station

¹⁵ Lynette Russell, *Colonial Frontiers: Indigenous-European Encounters in Settler Societies* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2001); Penelope Edmonds, *Settler Colonialism and (Re)conciliation: Frontier Violence, Affective Performances and Imaginative Refoundings* (United Kingdom: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

¹⁶ Bennett, *Christison*, p. 87.

¹⁷ Bennett, *Christison*, p. 12.

¹⁸ Holland, *Just Relations*, p. 59.

precinct for the next forty years. Given the violent state of the north Queensland frontier at that time and the fact that anyone who 'let in' the Aborigines was considered a fool, this was indeed an extraordinary gesture.¹⁹ He was a smart man. Lammermoor was situated on a string of creeks and watercourses important to the Dalleburra. Indeed, a waterhole on the homestead was a meeting place of the tribes. It was thus the only workable solution for both parties.

It was also the foundation of a remarkable relationship between Christison and Barney, in particular, who became his right hand man. Bennett relays the story in her biography of how Barney bestowed the name of 'Munggra' on her father which she surmised derived from 'mung-er' meaning 'to hear, to understand, to know'.²⁰ While Bennett describes her father as the Dalleburra's beloved master, his epithet for them was his 'faithfuls' which she later dutifully inscribed on the many photographs her mother took of them. His construction of them as faithful rather than resilient or pragmatic or even smart like himself, is itself demonstrative of the power he wielded as a settler-colonial and empire maker in his own right. Yet, while it was symptomatic of his paternalistic relationship with them it also betrayed his own dependence on them. The fact was that, with family constantly coming and going, running a huge pastoral empire with a satellite station to the west, the Dalleburra were quite literally his faithfuls. There is little doubt that without their significant labour the station and he would not have been the success they were. That he came to appreciate this was demonstrated in his stipulation, on the sale of the property in 1910, that the Dalleburra be taken on by the new owners too.²¹

Mary Bennett's appreciation of the Dalleburra's role in both Lammermoor and her father's life emerged slowly. She returned to

¹⁹ Alison Palmer, *Colonial Genocide* (Bathurst: Crawford House, 2000); Jonathan Richards, *The Secret War: A True History of Queensland's Native Police* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2008).

²⁰ Holland, *Just Relations*, p. 59.

²¹ Holland, *Just Relations*, p. 61.

Australia with her father in 1910 to organise sale of the property, just before his retirement, and wrote about this moment in her biography of him some twenty years later. In it she describes Mimi (herself) as a self-centered, uppity, insensitive, racist snob. Her character is counter-poised against that of Wyma, Barney's wife and the old maid of Lammemoor who had helped raise her while on visits to Lammermoor as a child. In comparison to Mimi Wyma is steadfast, loyal, caring, patient and wise. She was also loyal to her husband, Barney, a fidelity contrasted with Mary's mother who is rendered in the book as flighty, inconsistent and spoilt by Christison. When Wyma is asked by Christison's wife to travel back to England with the children and herself, she decides to stay on Lammermoor by her husband's side, as Bennett characterises it.

Her deep admiration of Wyma is also palpable in a moving tribute she penned on Wyma's death in 1926. Published in the *Townsville Daily Bulletin*, we learn that Wyma was 'Booloodea Timullinya', one of three wives of the ko-bee-berry or headman, Warmboomooloo. Bennett describes her with great admiration as resourceful, clever, courageous and kind, again contrasting Wyma's generosity with her own meanness of spirit:

I used to abuse blackfellows to her (Wyma), not realizing that she was black and she only beamed on me indulgently'.²²

Thus, not only does she reveal that she was racist, rude and dismissive to Wyma while growing up, we are able to discern some sort of transformation in Bennett between the moment she returned to Australia in 1910—at the age of 29—and the late 1920s, aged in her mid to late forties. So, what had happened to result in this change of heart and head?

What had happened was enough to see her 'give up everything', according to her sister, Helen, and take up the call for mission

²² Holland, *Just Relations*, p. 73.

work.²³ Certainly the deaths of her father, mother and husband between 1915 and 1927 took their toll. Her father's death had a profound effect on the family whose fortunes had changed after the war with Christison losing many investments in Europe. Not long after, the family sold the Burwell Park estate in Lincolnshire and Helen brought their mother to Australia to settle with her new husband and family in northern New South Wales. Having married Charles Douglas Bennett, a mariner in the Royal Navy in 1914, Mary stayed on in England. Their mother died within two years of arriving back in Australia, in 1922, and within five years Mary's husband, twenty-five years her senior, had also died.

Actually, she had only really experienced about six years of married life with Charles Bennett. They married a year before her father died and he immediately went off to serve in the navy for the duration of the first world war. He didn't return until 1921 and died six years later. While her sister subsequently maintained that it was only after his death that Mary threw herself into the Aboriginal cause, it seems that this had already happened by the time of his death, for her biography of her father appeared in the same year as his death, in 1927. Her slow realisation of the Dalleburra's pivotal role in both her father's success, and thus her own comfort, had a lot to do with this work.

It would seem that Mary had taken to writing and research as a means of dealing with her loss and grief and of finding purpose in her life at a time when the expectation for women of her class was marriage and family. At best it was also hoped that she might follow her mother and become an accomplished artist.²⁴ Instead she engrossed herself in her father's considerable papers and read widely. Her father's papers were an incredibly rich resource containing key features of his life in Queensland and his notes on the Dalleburra. He had compiled an ethnography and language lists for an account of

²³ Helen Cameron to Reverend F. H. Griffiths, 21 November 1961, Noel Butlin Archives Centre and University Archives, Australian National University.

²⁴ Alison Holland, 'Wielding Her Pen Like a Sword. Mary Bennett's War Against the Australian State', *Lilith*, 22, 2016, pp. 37–51.

the tribe. His Dalleburra dictionary appeared in EM Curr's *Australian Race*, a four-volume account of the origins and customs of the Aborigines published in the late 1880s. Bennett set to work on compiling his notes on the Dalleburra for publication in *Man*, the journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute.²⁵ At the same time, she learnt that her father had wanted to write a defence of Aboriginal people, 'a character but little understood and very much misrepresented', as he wrote.²⁶ Two of his key concerns were colonial prejudice and the willingness of many colonial commentators to accept the eventual, and probable, annihilation of Aboriginal people.

As Bennett read and wrote and reflected, in her loneliness, it would seem that she came to see that which she had been blind to: that the Dalleburra were among the most faithful of all and, more than that, that Aboriginal labour, ingenuity, generosity and companionship had been at the foundation of the Australian settlement. She resolved to complete her father's unfulfilled ambition. And why not? She had lost most of the anchors of her life, apart from her faith, she was childless and of independent means. She had also had a falling out with her mother and sister which was partly to do with accusations that her husband was a bigamist which she did not accept and partly to do with her feeling that her mother had been 'taken' from her by her sister back to Australia. This rift was never repaired and the Aboriginal cause filled the gap for the rest of her life.

Moreover, the time was ripe. She began contributing articles to the *Manchester Guardian* about Aboriginal conditions in Australia developing a reputation as a champion of the Aborigines. Indeed, Australian conditions were a frequent source of concern and complaint in the heart of the empire, particularly in Western Australia where from the late nineteenth century tales of exploitation, slavery and cruelty to Aborigines leaked. But, by the interwar years,

²⁵ M. M. Bennett, 'Notes on the Dalleburra Tribe of Northern Queensland', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Northern Ireland*, 57, 1928, pp. 319-415.

²⁶ Holland, *Just Relations*, p. 76.

questions of native policy around the periphery of the empire were a high priority. These years were the highpoint of Britain's conscience on Africa.²⁷ Questions of colonial policy were at the forefront of the political landscape and Britain's leadership of the League of Nations at the end of the first world war did much to propel the native cause to the forefront of political discourse and simultaneously project Britain's image to the world as a humane government looking to protect and advance native interests. Indeed, particular clauses in the League of Nations covenant directly stipulated this.

This was an exciting time to be alive for the would-be reformer and humanitarian. The native question had long been a concern in England and now, with control of East Africa, as well as large portions of West Africa, which Britain acquired at the end of the war, there was much work to be done. This context resulted in an incredibly vibrant imperial culture in the interwar years literally swimming in pronouncements about right policies and treatment of colonised peoples, including within it a robust feminist movement.²⁸ There was a wide circulation of ideas, debates, forums, conferences, reports and commissions of inquiry, discussions of trusteeship and, in the context of the centenary of the abolition of slavery in British territories in 1933, even a nostalgic celebration of empire itself.

At the heart of this was the promotion of indirect rule, most famously epitomized in Lord Lugard's rule in Nigeria. Indeed, by the interwar years, indirect rule, promoted as 'systematic use of the customary institutions of the people as agents of local rule', was widely viewed as the apotheosis of a humane solution to the problem of colonial governance'.²⁹ Indirect rule had such a strong hold on British imperial imaginations, the historian John Cell tells us, that

²⁷ Judith M. Brown and W. M. Roger Louis (eds), *The Oxford History of the British Empire: The Twentieth Century* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 38.

²⁸ Bernard Porter, *Critics of Empire: British Radicals and the Imperial Challenge* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2008).

²⁹ J. C. Myers, *Indirect Rule in South Africa: Tradition, Modernity and the Costuming of Political Power* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2008).

even where it so potently failed a generation of colonial officials and liberal-minded people believed that it was the basis of progressive policy.³⁰ Cell argues that this was so because of the widespread disillusion with western civilization in these years. By contrast, native civilisations had attributes worth retaining.

No-one was a better, more evangelical promoter of native civilisation than Mary Bennett. Like so many of her compatriots Bennett's personal alienation was heightened in the interwar years by an intense disillusion with western civilisation. Armed with a new appreciation of Aboriginal culture, its vitality, communal orientation, language and family cohesion, she initially took to the streets of east London. As Seth Koven describes it this was a cultural phenomenon of late nineteenth, early twentieth, century Britain which saw leaders of church and state travelling to the slums to get first-hand experience of poverty to help formulate solutions to the pressing social problems of the day.³¹ It was propelled by a critique of aristocratic privilege as it freed participants from the conventions of it.

This 'excursion' did not work out for Bennett but it did not need to. In the midst of this moment she had a profound experience which resulted in her swapping the slum for the Australian frontier. Through her humanitarian connections—by this stage she had joined groups like the prestigious Anti-Slavery and Aborigines' Protection Society—she heard about Anthony Martin Fernando, an Aboriginal activist, then living in England, who had travelled the world to publicise injustices to Australian Aborigines.

Fernando's was a complex, fascinating and tragic tale of protest and performance on the world stage, recently captured by historian Fiona Paisley.³² Bennett visited him while he was awaiting trial in the

³⁰ John Cell, 'Colonial Rule', Brown and Louis, *The Oxford History*, p. 241.

³¹ Seth Koven, *Slumming: Sexual and Social Politics in Victorian London* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004)

³² Fiona Paisley, *The Lone Protester: AM Fernando in Australia and Europe* (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2012).

Old Bailey in 1929 for threatening a man with a gun following a racial taunt. By that stage he had attracted a great deal of curiosity and attention, particularly from among the humanitarian set who looked for signs of insanity in his courtroom rants. However, when Bennett met him, she found a gentle, intelligent and very sane man whose story of familial and maternal loss and legal injustice on the Australian frontier, notably in Western Australia from where he had originally fled, impressed her very deeply, as did his accusations of cant and hypocrisy to her concern.

There is little doubt that his claim that the Aborigines must be looked upon as human beings was the reason she titled her next book, *The Australian Aboriginal As A Human Being*, published in 1930. This was a book of and for the times. Divided roughly in two parts, the first part was a series of chapters which explored key aspects of Aboriginal culture which she detailed with thick description and appreciation. The second part was a detailed expose of the history, conditions, treatment, laws and present status of the Aborigines in Australia. It was laced with history, newspaper editorials, explorer's journals, the findings of the latest reports and commissions on the native question in England, settler reminiscence and personal and family anecdotes.

It was a searing critique of the policy environment in Australia which she explained robbed Aboriginal people of humanity. 'They are not only dispossessed', she said, 'they have their family life destroyed, they are outlawed and they are under a system analogous to slavery'.³³ These issues, particularly child removal and family dispersal, along with conditions of Aboriginal labour, would remain central to her crusade until her death. The book also spoke to contemporary conditions and politics. She raised cases of injustice then taking place on the Australian frontier and referred to a small but growing group of people, a 'merciful minority', as she put it, who were lobbying for change. She also indicated that her quarrel was not with the settlers but with the 'system' and that Australia's Aboriginal

³³ Mary Bennett, *The Australian Aboriginal As A Human Being* (London: Alston Rivers, 1930), p. 87.

question was one it shared with many other places around the world. It was a world problem and the most pressing of the twentieth century.

So, by 1930s, the basic ingredients of her crusade were in place as well as its basic underpinnings. Of course, much of it can be explained as a personal quest to make amends for the past, to make good on her father's legacy, to be the dutiful daughter, or simply to find purpose, to put that finely honed brain to use. She was also in the right place at the right time, her deeply personal desire to make amends matched a wider humanitarian pulse both in Australia and England at this time. Yet, she was, in many ways a misfit—temporarily, geographically, ideologically, politically and personally.

The most obvious misfit was her striking out to critique conditions which had largely been at the base of her own father's empire and certainly her own comfort and ease. When she died in October 1961, aged 80, her sister said that she had given up more than most in pursuing her mission.³⁴ Indeed, Bennett was not only one of landed gentry but she was also of distinguished Scottish pedigree. Her sister listed the luminaries of the Christison line. Particularly noteworthy was her father's uncle, Sir Robert Christison (1797–1882), a highly esteemed member of the Scottish medical fraternity, a leading toxicologist and physician to Queen Victoria of Scotland and President of the Royal College of Physicians in Edinburgh and British Medical Association. Then there was their great grandfather, Sir Robert's father, Alexander Christison (1753–1820) who was professor of Humanity at Edinburgh university. As her sister reflected, 'she was so unpretentious I don't suppose anyone in Western Australia knew her origin'.³⁵ Certainly, she ended her days in relative obscurity in a rented house in Kalgoorlie where she lived rather ascetically till her final days.

She was also a misfit in her immediate family because she was not a tory. She voted Labor all her life, a political position which was at

³⁴ Helen Cameron to Reverend Griffith, November, 1961 (cp. fn. 23).

³⁵ Helen Cameron to Reverend Griffith.

odd with her father's virulent anti-unionism. And, in many ways, her critique of Aboriginal conditions was as conditioned by her sense of them as a class as much as a race. They were 'landless helots', living in forms of peonage, and her intense focus on their conditions of labour, all her life, betrayed a fixation on poor workers. Indeed, much later in her life, and in the context of arguing for forms of economic development for Aboriginal people that were co-operative at base, she referred to the Rochdale pioneers as 'the poor men who saved a starving nation by honest commonsense'.³⁶ And, not long before her death, when she became intensely critical of the policy landscape in Australia, and the policy makers, she maintained that she would rather have a kindly workman for a judge than these 'self-idolators'.³⁷ And, in many ways her critique of policy hinted at the anti-colonial radicalism promoted by key thinkers on the left in Britain in the 1880s and 1890s, the likes of Edmund Morel, the great crusader against King Leopold's slavery in the Congo, whose crusade she had witnessed at the turn of the century.³⁸

Indeed, in many ways, she was also caught between empire and colony, between the imperial and the national, not really belonging, properly, in either camp. When a friend of hers suggested that she become a member of the prestigious Anti-Slavery and Aborigines' Protection Society in London, the men of the committee needed persuading of her bona fides. Furthermore, we see her uncomfortable fit in relation to the feminist movement too. In 1930, following the publication of her book, *The Australian Aboriginal As A Human Being*, she decides to pack up and go to the Australian frontier to observe conditions on the ground and do as she had requested other women

³⁶ Mary Bennett to Ada Bromham, 13 June, 1958. Mary Bennett and Ada Bromham, Private Archives, State Library of Western Australia, MN 2958, Acc 8303 A/10.

³⁷ Mary Bennett to Ada Bromham, 26 March, 1956. Mary Bennett and Ada Bromham, Private Archives, SLWA, MN 2958, Acc 8303 A/18.

³⁸ Adam Hochschild, *King Leopold's Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror and Heroism in Colonial Africa* (New York: Houghton Miffler Company, 1999).

do: try and change the ‘old evil system’ for a ‘humane one’.³⁹ Before she went she had been greatly energised by a very vibrant feminist movement in London who were concerned with Indigenous conditions around the empire. British women MPs, like Eleanor Rathbone, had taken up the cause of colonised women, particularly the position of women in India and the prominent feminist organisation, the British Commonwealth League, had become a hub of intense feminist activity for women around the empire in the interwar years.⁴⁰

Indeed, she had been asked to present a paper on the administration of the Aborigines at a conference of the League in 1929 wherein she basically rehearsed much of what she was writing up in her book at the time. She presented another in 1930 when the theme of the conference was ‘domestic slavery’. Key feminists were taking up the cause of women in other cultures whom they considered to be enslaved by entrenched but outmoded patriarchal systems such as child marriage and polygamy with its link to infant betrothal. Bennett gave a paper but it is more about conditions of slave labour which Aboriginal people endured in Australia, the lack of wages, the removal of tribes to work for white people and conditions of forced labour which was at the base of her critique. She argued that dispossession rendered Aboriginal people economically dependent, compelled to work for the settlers and unable to sell their labour freely. She was even asked why she had not taken this matter up with the International Labour Organisation instead, to which she replied that the International Labour Organisation maintained that dispossession and starvation did not constitute forced labour. She

³⁹ Mary Bennett, *The Condition of the Aborigines of Australia Under the Federal Government. A Paper Read Before the British Commonwealth League*, June, 1929.

⁴⁰ Susan Pedersen, ‘The Maternalist Moment in British Colonial Policy: The Controversy Over Child Slavery in Hong Kong, 1917–1941’, *Past and Present*, 171, May, 2001, pp. 161–202; Susan Pedersen, *Eleanor Rathbone and the Politics of Conscience* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004); Barbara Bush, *Imperialism, Race and Resistance* (London: Routledge, 1999).

continued to give papers before the British Commonwealth League, mostly raising the issue of how various matters impacted Aboriginal women in Australia. However, they tended not to get the traction of those of other representatives who were raising the position of women in India, China, Africa or Hong Kong. Furthermore, her constant carping about Australian conditions got Australian feminist representatives upset who saw it as unpatriotic.⁴¹

Then, once in Australia, she remained out of place. By 1931 she was sailing up the Western Australian coast, stopping off at missions and noting conditions and treatment along the way. Having close friends among the South Australian humanitarian community, which was then one of the more strident and organised in the cause, she had intended to go to South Australia but seeing conditions were so bad in Western Australia and possibly with the memory of Fernando firmly in mind, she requested A. O. Neville, the Chief Aboriginal Protector in that state, if she could spend some time on the Mt Margaret Mission, on the eastern goldfields. This was a faith mission run by the United Aborigines' Mission. It had been established in 1921 by the German missionary Rod Schenk who found the local Aboriginal people, the Wongutha, in a very demoralised state at the end of a mining boom, unfed, unemployed, untaught, unhealthy. Armed with a particularly evangelical mission to provide food, a home and God to them he nonetheless saw education as vital to their long-term survival.⁴²

Arriving early in 1932, Bennett ended up staying for another nine years, becoming the first full-time teacher to the children of the goldfields. Indeed, in all her activist career this was the longest stretch in the one place and, notwithstanding her advocacy and activism on Aboriginal issues, it was the work she most loved: 'lifting up civilisation's casualties', as she once framed it. While educating the

⁴¹ Marilyn Lake, 'Feminism and the Gendered Politics of Antiracism in Australia, 1927–1957: From Maternalist Protectionism to Leftist Assimilationism', *Australian Historical Studies*, 110, 1998, pp. 91–108.

⁴² Margaret Morgan, *A Drop in a Bucket: The Mount Margaret Story* (Victoria: United Aborigines' Mission, 1986).

children with resources she funded herself, which included two spinning looms she had imported from Sweden to teach the Aboriginal women how to spin wool, she fired off shots in the local press concerning the poor condition and status of Aboriginal people throughout Australia. I imagine her light on in her little cottage on the mission most nights and the sound of her typewriter as she began the task of documenting and critiquing Australian Aboriginal policy and writing in their defence. Education, along with their own family and communities remained key to her notions of Aboriginal justice and long-term survival.

We might say that, along with the missionaries, she was part of the Anglo-American protestant assault on Indigenous cultures characteristic of the times. She moved in the missionary set and shared the missionary critique of polygamy then still widely in practice, even among Aboriginal people living in the settled areas. Yet while the missionaries were critiquing the Aboriginal patriarchy for their treatment of Aboriginal women, she was critiquing white settler men for their complicity in it. And while she was certainly in favour of bringing the word of God to the Wongutha, her teaching program at the mission necessarily steered it away from evangelism to vocational training. Using the state school curriculum, she attempted to get the school children through it in record time to make up for time lost with no education at all. This involved using innovative techniques, including student-led learning for which she attracted attention among educationalists. This was not just about instilling Christian values, it was about providing them with capacity to earn a living in the white man's world.

On the one hand, her critique of white male settlers found accord with a broader feminist critique of the behaviour of 'frontier men' and concern with the position of Aboriginal women in these years. Yet, she ended up alienating the key feminist lobby groups in Australia because of her outspokenness and her unrelenting attack on the Western Australian bureaucracy for the policy of biological

absorption.⁴³ This formulation took time to emerge in the policy setting in the interwar years but it was A. O. Neville, the key Western Australian bureaucrat in Aboriginal affairs, who eventually led the pack and saw in it the solution to the ‘half-caste’ problem, then widely understood as THE colour problem in Australia.

She saw this as tantamount to genocide and railed against it, while the key feminist groups, both in the state and nationally, agreed with it, seeing it as facilitating a process already occurring and the only viable way forward. Bennett continued to argue for land, education and citizenship for Aboriginal people, arguing often and long that Aboriginal children needed their own families and communities and that the policy setting in Australia constituted a form of direct rule—rather than indirect rule—which she maintained enslaved and impoverished.

While her sensational claims about the position of the Aboriginal mother in the heart of the empire in 1933 did precipitate a Royal Commission in Western Australia, this was largely what Neville had wanted. He saw it as a means of shutting her up.⁴⁴ It was after the Commission that she largely withdrew to the mission, consolidated on her teaching and continued to formulate her ideas and critique of Aboriginal policy. But it was also after the Royal Commission that relations between her and the missionaries and the bureaucracy worsened. There were a variety of reasons for this but it ended up in a massive, unprecedented, confrontation between mission organisations and the state in Western Australia in which the latter decided to bring the missions in line with government policy. Losing their independence they now became conduits of policy and were required

⁴³ Anna Haebich, *Broken Circles: Fragmenting Indigenous Families, 1800–2000* (Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 2000); Pat Jacobs, *Mister Neville: a Biography* (Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1990).

⁴⁴ A. O. Neville to the Secretary of the Premier’s Department, 24 November, 1934, Mary Bennett, Allegations by Mrs Mary Bennett in regards to native slavery, inadequate reserves and traffic in native women, State Archives of Western Australia. NA 1/7, Department of Native Affairs and Native Welfare, ACC 993, 116/1932.

to tow the policy line. This was momentous and it largely established the institutional framework for systematic child removal which was to become a key feature of the postwar assimilation framework.

Such was the hostility between her and A. O. Neville that he refused to respond to her further. He retired not long after this, as did she, back to London for the duration of the war. This was a period of intense activity in the cause, reconnecting with key contacts, writing, presenting papers to forums such as the Anti-Slavery and Aborigines' Protection Society and shoring up her facts. There is no doubt that, during this time, she was re-arming herself for battle. When she returned to Australia, following a short spell at Cundeelee, a mission further east on the goldfields of Western Australia, she came to critique the missions too, leaving there in horror at their complicity in the removal of a young full descent Aboriginal boy.⁴⁵

By this stage, the early 1950s, she managed to find solace in a younger, emerging activist set, mostly from the left, who, impressed by the anti-racist rhetoric of the hour, were beginning to mobilise to the Aboriginal cause. She did not really fit it either in terms of age or even politics (some, for example, were members of the Communist Party), or even her strong Christian commitment and old-fashioned feminism, but she didn't really need to. By this stage, she had become even shrewder, understanding her out-of-placeness and actively masking her identity in the cause.

A publication which was largely hers, called *Black Chattels*, sponsored by the National Council of Civil Liberties and published in London in 1946, had the president of the Council's name attached, rather than her own. Furthermore, a special fund she established following her resignation from the mission at Cundeelee—which she set aside as a 'Human Rights Trust Fund'—was in her closet friend's name, rather than hers. Certainly, after the war, her human rights discourse was a better fit. Yet, there is no doubt that her long campaign to close the gap in health and educational outcomes, to stop child removal, to demand land and community survival, to

⁴⁵ Holland, *Just Relations*, pp. 258–291.

prevent violence to Aboriginal women and promote Aboriginal citizenship, ultimately belonged to the latter half of the twentieth century than the first half.

So, the question which hovers around the contours of Bennett's life and work etched in this paper is how to account for it? Certainly, as I have shown elsewhere, we can find explanations in her feminism, in her humanitarianism and her Christianity. As I explain in my book about her life, we can also see a strong commitment to labour values and even anticolonial sentiment. In her taking to the streets after the First World War we can see someone, like so many others of her class, searching for answers for civilisation's bankruptcy but, what about her Scottishness?

We might be persuaded to accept her sister's characterisation of her as leaving her past and background behind in pursuit of her mission as a way of interpreting her singularity. Indeed, in my recent book on Bennett, I argued that alienation from and loss of family goes some way to explain her commitment to the cause. This was not just about death and geographical distance. It was emotional disconnection, partly self-inflicted. Yet, as I also show, if she'd had a quarrel with her family over her husband, this is insufficient in and of itself to explain her crusade. It does reflect, however, something of a rejection of what her family stood for. Yet, a consideration of her deep family past suggests that, in fact, her severing of family ties was never as complete as her sister suggested following her death.

Against the kaleidoscope of her life, the one thing that can be said is how, in her life and life's work, she fundamentally kept faith with what we might call her Scottish inheritance. It is not clear how much of the Scottish side of her family she appreciated. It might be that her 'peep peeping' at her father through the ship's porthole as a child (as relayed at the beginning of this article) remained a metaphor for a partial view of it. She really only defined her mission in its English sense, as an anti-slavery crusade, and, after all, the rejection of her family was the undertow of her mission. Yet a closer view reveals just how central and defining it was and, more than that, how Scottishness does appear to be an important part of this.

We can see this in relation to enlightenment and we can see it in relation to faith. Enlightenment was at the core of her mission. It was fuelled by her epiphany about her father and about the Aboriginal people as human beings. It was embedded in her humanitarian quest as she saw her work as educating the public in the cause, and it was embedded in her work educating Aboriginal children which was her

delight. In her eyes, education was vital to the long-term survival of Aboriginal people in the white man's world. Her enlightenment was also fundamental to her anti-racism and to her defence of Aboriginal humanity and both were at the basis of her deep alienation from the world and from western civilisation. Indeed, in this context, enlightenment was what was needed for the world. Moreover, her own enlightenment was bound up in recognising the failure of power—of governments and of men—to bring about a just world. Her rejection of her family was in part a rejection of what it stood for which was privilege, complacency, entitlement, self-satisfaction and artifice. This was why she saw workers as the true nobles and Aboriginal men like Barney, her father's right-hand man on Lammermoor, as the true men.

If her father's treatment of the Dalleburra embodied the possibilities of the enlightenment, her own quest undoubtedly had its roots in that project as her great grandfather, Alexander Christison, was not only a leading educator, he was an influential figure of the Scottish enlightenment. As Jonathan Israel reminds us education was key to the Scottish enlightenment and it was key to Christison's own success as an Enlightenment thinker.⁴⁶ Born in 1753, one of seventeen children, he was the son of a small hill tenant farmer in the lower Lammermoor Hills in Scotland. Unlike others of his generation who had advantages of birth and wealth, he rose to prominence via hard work, a fine brain and a reputation as an educationist as he moved from the local school to teaching at a grammar school, to taking charge of Edinburgh high school and, eventually, to taking up the Chair of Humanity at the University. Partly self-educated he was clearly one of those middling Scots whose own freedom from aristocratic class oppression found expression following Union with England in the first decades of the eighteenth century.

He was an enlightenment man, excelling in mathematics but also in philosophy and science and the classics. His own singularity was in admitting large numbers of students to his university class *gratis*. One of his signature works was his 1802 essay, *On the General Diffusion of*

⁴⁶ Israel, *Democratic Enlightenment*, pp. 233–269.

Knowledge: One Great Cause of the Prosperity of Great Britain, wherein he wrote that ‘genius was no respecter of ranks, and may be found in the cottage than in the palace, because there are thousands of cottagers for one prince’.⁴⁷ This was a long essay which dispelled class hierarchy and the privilege and entitlement that went with aristocratic privilege.

In so much of which she did, wrote and applauded Bennett was like her great grandfather. Knowing this background helps explain her fixation on workers, slaves, Aboriginal capability, education as a pathway to Aboriginal equality and the sanctity of labour. It also puts her comments about the ‘faults of the rulers’ into perspective. Yet, her Scottish inheritance is also present in her faith. The other great patriarch of her family was her own grandfather, also Alexander, the long term Church of Scotland minister in Berwickshire, also known for his fine scholarship. Faith was a core thread of Bennett’s life. While she came to reject many things and people, including most missionaries, she never rejected God. Indeed, her life embodied the protestant Calvinist tradition with its emphasis on personal faith, work, service, self-abnegation and the sovereignty of God. He was the final arbiter and, in her final years, as her battle with bureaucracies and bureaucrats intensified, as she saw them abuse their power to defeat Aboriginal lives, as she saw it, as she lost faith in both sides of the political spectrum and most people, she derived much personal comfort from her faith as she wrote to her closest friend not long before she died:

But we are on the Lord’s side and I feel now I must put the burden on him and acknowledge to HIM my own ineptness. He will work and use us and we must trust HIM to perform his justice which is perfect.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Alexander Christison, *On the General Diffusion of Knowledge: One Great Cause of the Prosperity of Great Britain* (Edinburgh: Peter Hill, 1802), p.7.

⁴⁸ Mary Bennett to Ada Bromham [no date]. Mary Bennett and Ada Bromham, Private Archives, SLWA, MN 2958, Acc 8303 A/2.

Thus, at the end of her life, she was able to simultaneously justify her own long crusade not just an act of redemption and personal salvation but God's work.

As I suggested at the beginning of this paper Bennett and, to a lesser extent, her father encapsulated what several historians have identified as characteristics of the Scottish settlement of Australia. It is not clear how much of this embodied the possibilities of the enlightenment. In many ways, her efforts at race justice demonstrate the possibilities and limits of the enlightenment project. A close look at her family story nevertheless indicates the importance of enlightenment to the Christison story. Perhaps her father's search for land and profit in Australia, which included the long-term exploitation of Aboriginal people, represented a turning away from these roots and Bennett's long and persistent efforts for 'just relations' between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, a reconciliation or return to them?

