

Australia's Debt

Unpaid Wages to Indigenous Pastoral Workers

Ros Kidd



"The money is ours but the government won't give it back"

Mr Fred Edwards, stockman, Normanton, November 2002, transcripts of personal interviews May and November 2002, and September 2003, kindly provided by Christine Howes.

I.

ACCORDING TO *ANNUAL REPORTS* of Queensland's Aboriginal department, indigenous employment in the Queensland pastoral industry varied between 3000 and 6000 men, women and children for most of the twentieth century. This workforce was almost entirely controlled by the department until 1968. It dictated work locations, set the contracts with employers, was authorised to monitor treatment and conditions, and established complex financial controls of wages and savings which intensified after 1919, after which, according to John Bleakley who

Illustration: Kerrie Leishman

was Chief Protector of Aboriginals between 1914 and 1942, regulations to control rural employment operated 'practically without a hitch'.¹

His successor Cornelius O'Leary confirmed the priorities of the employment regime, stating in 1948 that the Aboriginal workforce 'continue to prove a valuable asset' to the pastoral industry.² Indeed records show this cheap labour pool was critical for industry survival in remote areas and Aboriginal workers were highly prized for their skills and stability (as will be discussed below). Yet across generations very few gained financially from their labours unless they were freed from State controls. For most, working and retirement lives were characterised by hardship, subsistence diet, minimal clothing, unsafe water and sanitation, and derelict shelter.

The Aboriginal workforce was also forged into a valuable asset for the government. This paper will examine the historical, legal, administrative and financial context of Aboriginal pastoral employment with a view to illuminating the human dimensions.

Brief reminiscences of Mr Fred Edwards will reveal ramifications which still resonate today.

II. The nineteenth century

MORETON BAY OPERATED as a penal outpost of New South Wales from 1825. When it was declared a free settlement in 1842 there were around 200 Aboriginal people living near the town, several of whom worked at odd jobs. The town felt

itself besieged by surrounding tribes numbering several thousand, raids on crops and stock were common, and there were bitter protests when the military was withdrawn in 1848.

The rapid 'opening up' of the new colony and the unauthorised

occupation of land by squatters progressed exponentially faster than the processes of law and order. By the time Moreton

Bay achieved independence as a colony in 1858 only 7000 of 25,000 settlers lived in Brisbane. Increasingly, as occupation advanced into new areas, the Native Police force was called in to combat Aboriginal resistance and to exact revenge for attacks on livestock or homesteads.

Historian George Rusden, writing in the 1880s, described the Native Police as 'a mere machine for murder'.³ It was common for pastoralists to summon, and at times subsidise, patrols by the Native Police to clear local people from properties. One



Domestic Workers, Lelavale Station, West of Julia Creek, 1896

1. Bleakley, J W, *The Aborigines of Australia*, Jacaranda Press, Brisbane, 1961:172.

2. *Annual Report, Department of Native Affairs*. 1948:2

3. Rusden, G W, *History of Australia*, Vol 3, Chapman & Hall, London, 1883:231.

Darling Downs pastoral company offering several years' funding in 1861 stated that without police presence 'we can't get men at any price'.¹ Others, however, acknowledged that it was because people had been cleared off the cattle runs that they were forced to spear cattle to survive.

In outlying areas, where white labour was not available, property owners induced Aboriginal families to work in return for sanctuary, food, tobacco or opiates. Chronic shortages of labour during the goldrushes of the 1860s and 1870s increased dependency on Aboriginal labour. One correspondent to the *Queenslander* wrote: 'Had it not been for the Aborigines doing nearly all my work during the late rush to the Palmer ... my losses would have been ruinous.'² Yet hostile attitudes in frontier areas and rogue attacks by the Native Police jeopardised Aboriginal employment, prompting some pastoralists to seek official assurances they would 'not interfere with my blacks'. Farmers from Mackay petitioned the government in 1873 demanding protection for their workers.

By this time Aboriginal men and women were a common sight in country towns, working as domestics, wood choppers and water carriers, or bartering skins and clothes props. On outback pastoral properties men, women and children did house, yard and station work. Others took seasonal work with tin miners, sandalwood loggers and the coastal pearling and bêche-de-mer (or sea slug) traders of Cape York. Exploitation was common. Children and women were bought and sold as 'working companions', promised wages were defaulted, physical brutality was routine, and narcotic addiction was common

currency, particularly in the far west of the State.

Correspondence in the 1880s indicates some workers were aware of employment options although at times subject to deception. 'As soon as a boy becomes useful', complained Mr Aldridge of Maryborough, 'someone induces him to leave your service with a promise of higher wages which the boy does not receive ... Many of us that value and employ the labour would willingly subscribe to any regulations and supervision considered necessary by the Government.'³ The *Native Laborers' Protection Act* of 1884 did include binding contracts covering wages and conditions, and also penalties against the seizure of women, but it targetted the notorious sea trades and applied to Aborigines only within a ten-mile coastal strip.

Despite their importance to the pastoral industry, Aboriginal workers were routinely treated with contempt. In 1896 Police Commissioner W. Parry-Okeden reported: 'After the whites have done their meal, the black stockmen are handed their 'rations' which consist of the broken viands from the table, and such pieces of 'junk' as have become tainted'. These miserable scraps, he continued, were taken away and shared with those waiting in the camps.⁴ In the same year Special Commissioner Archibald Meston maintained that in western and northern Queensland local people had been hunted from their tribal country like animals and remained in a state of perpetual warfare with pioneers.⁵

The Aborigines Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act of 1897 was

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1. Queensland State Archives (QSA) COL/A22, 22.12.1861.
 2. Quoted in Bennett, M, *Christison of Lammermoor*, Alston Rivers Ltd, London, 1928:95.

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3. QSA COL/A409, 6.12.1884.
 4. Parry-Okeden, W E, *Report of the Police Commissioner to the Home Secretary*, 19.2.1897.
 5. Meston, A, *Report on the Aborigines of Queensland*, Qld Votes & Proceedings, Vol IV, 1896:723.

intended to stem lawlessness and abuses. It threw a net of tight controls over any person of Aboriginal descent, who could now be summarily declared a ward of State, losing all rights and responsibilities for their own, or their families' lives. Such wards could be removed to a mission or settlement, or contracted out to work for a twelve-month period – there was no due process and no right of appeal. The 1897 Protection Act nominated a network of protectors, usually the local police, to monitor and report on all Aborigines in their area. For the next seventy years these powers determined the work prospects and the financial fortunes of thousands of Aboriginal families.

III. Tightening the net

THE GOVERNMENT LACKED the funds to marshal tens of thousands of Aborigines onto State-subsidised reserves and the political will to antagonise voters by removing or over-indulging the cheap Aboriginal labour its electors depended on. Exploitation of the Act was soon apparent.

Initially wages were left to the employer, and could be in clothing or food. In many stations outside protectors' range in remote north and western areas, virtual slavery continued. In 1899 a minimum rate of five shillings (\$24)¹ per month proposed for pastoral workers was vehemently opposed in parliament, in part because no minimum wage applied to white labour. It was further alleged that cheap Aboriginal labour was

already 'bringing the black man in competition with the white man'.



Washday, Granda Station, North of Cloncurry, 1906

In the twelve months to June 1900 over 1200 work agreements were processed. The minimum wage was introduced in 1901, ranging from children under 12 years and including

domestics. Comments in the department's 1904 *Annual Report* indicate the value placed on many Aboriginal workers: 'more reliable than the general class of white stockmen', 'as good and, in a great many instances, better', 'They know the country better, and are more biddable', 'As stock-riders and bushmen in many cases superior to the general station hands.' Yet these men were paid only one-eighth the white wage. Employment regulations under the 1897 Act did not initially apply to those already with 'trustworthy' employers, again allowing continued abuses particularly of girls and women. Most stations and many private families kept Aboriginal girls, most of whom were 'given to their owners when about seven or eight years of age', according to the Normanton protector, and the girls were not allowed to mix with other Aborigines.² Employers now rushed for applications to exempt these servants from the Act, claiming they had been 'brought up as one of the family'. Yet, as Northern Protector of Aborigines Dr Walter Roth reported, conditions for domestics and nursemaids were akin to slavery with long hours, limited freedom, no wages, and eviction if they fell pregnant. He limited exemptions to girls who clearly

1. Relativised to today's value. See End-note.

2. *Annual Report of the Northern Protector of Aborigines*, 1903:17.

understood they would lose the protections offered by the Act.¹

Widespread resistance to the paying of wages to girls and women was seen to indicate how few were paid previously. In one Western town a young girl worked for a household of three people for payment of 2/6 (\$11) per week. But her mistress hired her out to at least seven other people at sixpence a time, and kept this income for herself.² Roth reported another common ruse was to sign up men as a way of getting to their wives who, as non-employees themselves, were outside official oversight. An *Amendment Act* in 1901 made it illegal to have any Aboriginal woman on a premises without a permit.

Workers were paid at the end of the contract period but many were cheated of their cash before they returned home. Another ploy, particularly in the sea trades, was to abandon workers in remote areas toward the end of their contracts. Employers then declared they had absconded or died, and thus avoided payment. In 1902 Dr Roth set up the Aboriginals Protection of Property Account (APP) to collect wages due for distribution to their families.

From 1903 protectors were instructed to take direct payment of the wages of all female employees, and the system of thumb printing all transactions was initiated to reduce frauds. Wages were banked in the name of each employee, with the protector as trustee. Detailed cash books were to be kept and audited each year. The 1904 Annual Report gives this snapshot of workers in the Normanton area:

"In Normanton there are two camps, numbering about 200 Aborigines. Originally these camps were composed of Normanton natives, but their strength is now kept up by station boys who have left their employers, and who want a spell before going outside again; by others who have married Nor-

manton gins, and by various other causes ... they have their regular employers, and their payment is certain: if not paid, they never return to that employer, and there is no mendicancy ... They are orderly, biddable, and very honest ... They are employed as horse-boys, firewood cutters, yard-cleaners, nurse-girls, washerwomen, charwomen, &c."

From 1904 Aboriginal savings under government control increased as male wages now also went directly to protectors, at their discretion. For that year the Normanton protector reported he expected to hold savings of £500 (\$46,540). Workers were allowed to withdraw only half their earnings and only if the protector deemed it a 'necessary' expense. For several years Reverend Gribble, Anglican superintendent of the Yarrabah mission, had taken direct control of wages of inmates contracted to surrounding stations, retaining half the income for food and clothing of the elderly and sick. The wages of girls and women employed around the Brisbane area, since 1898, had been deposited in personal credit accounts by protectress Mrs Frew. She, however, was found to be swindling the girls' accounts, after their protests to the local member of parliament triggered a full inquiry. She was sacked in 1905.³

By 1904 the Gulf stations were run almost exclusively by Aboriginal labour. Roth was disgusted at the widespread exploitation of women and children at cattle mustering, not only because of the backbreaking work, but because the practice was 'supplementary to concubinage'. Local people complained bitterly of the rampant kidnapping of their children, a practice confirmed by the protector who said gangs of white men thought nothing of 'rounding up small mobs of wild natives and despoiling their women'. 'This practice is more common than many people

1. Ibid, 1899:10.

2. Ibid, 1903:2.

3. *Queensland Parliamentary Debates*, 1906:1165.

imagine', he continued, 'a large number of individuals have an idea that they can trade an aboriginal as they would a horse, or bullock – some of these people are good church goers.'¹

In 1911 the Chief Protector reported that many station managers, particularly in the far West, still retained 'a deep-rooted objection to paying the Aborigines anything for their services, unless it is coming back again through the station store.'² Most workers now only received a 'pocket money' portion during their contract period, fixed at the protector's discretion and varying between 30 per cent to 70 per cent. It was allotted in tobacco, matches or small articles, and signed for by the worker in a special book tendered at the close of the contract. Cheating was unchecked: station managers could simply charge for goods never supplied. And doctored pocket money books remained a scandal until the system ceased in the mid-1960s.

When John Bleakley became Chief Protector in 1914 he formalised the compulsory payment of all male wages directly to protectors. He exploited the shortage of white labour during the war years, observing that Western properties would pay double for labour to cut scrub for starving cattle. By 1915 the department controlled 4960 accounts, about 30 per cent of the total Aboriginal population in the State, with a credit balance of almost £57,000 (\$3.48 million).³ The government illegally kept the bank interest to underwrite its own outlays on food, rations and blankets. In 1915 Bleakley lobbied for a ten per cent levy on bank accounts to 'increase social responsibility' of workers for their dependents. He calculated a windfall of £2500 (\$152,900) per annum, 40 per cent greater than current government expenditure on relief items.⁴

He expressed surprise, in his 1916 *Annual Report*, that so many workers believed their savings were being diverted to cover government liabilities.

IV. Abuse of trust

THE LEVY ON ABORIGINAL EARNINGS was introduced in 1919, set at 5 per cent from single workers and half that from married workers. Workers were not informed, nor gave consent, to this confiscation of earnings. Income went into the new Aboriginal Provident Fund (APF), a Trust fund intended to provide relief for unemployed or sick workers. The levy applied to all those not based on missions and settlements. The latter were already taxed at 10 per cent for married workers and half that for single, as a contribution towards maintenance and amenities; able-bodied inmates had to work at least 24 hours a week to qualify for rations.

The 1919 regulations set new pay rates for the 4000 Aboriginal pastoral workers. This group were excluded from the McCawley Station Hand Award the previous year after strenuous lobbying from the Queensland government and contrary to demands by the Australian Workers Union (AWU) for equal wages. The new rates were set at 66 per cent the white wage, and although pastoralists protested this made Aboriginal labour too expensive the hypocrisy of their claim is evident by the massive jump in earnings, from around £45,300 (\$2.58 million) in 1917 to £61,840 (\$2.9 million) in 1919, from which the government pocketed interest of £3327 (\$156,560). This brought private savings under government control to over £120,000 (\$5.64 million), which the Anglican Archbishop of Brisbane condemned as a callous mechanism to reduce official expenditure. A public service Inquiry in 1922⁵ reported almost half the deductions made by rural protectors were

1. QSA A/44680, 1.1.04.

2. *Annual Report*, 1911:11.

3. *Annual Report*, 1915:16.

4. *Annual Report*, 1915:5.

inaccurate, and recommended that workers be allowed to appeal dubious dealings on their savings. This was never implemented. Meanwhile parliament was told several police had already been sacked for swindling Aboriginal workers by simply demanding endorsement of receipts for grossly inflated amounts. In April 1921 thumb prints were re-introduced as 'a further safeguard' against police fraud,¹ and these had to be witnessed by a disinterested third party. The Inquiry observed there had been no inspections of protectors for several years, nor of the circumstances of the 8000 rural Aborigines and their need for departmental relief.

The Inquiry also found that both the APP and the APF were defrauded by the government to cover legitimate consolidated revenue liabilities. The former account, set up to receive and distribute unclaimed earnings, was being operated as an expense account for outlays, refunds, transfers and advances. And the government had taken £1700 (\$83,670) for development of the government's Barambah settlement and £590 (\$29,000) in grants to the missions. The new Provident Fund, which had collected over £3000 (\$147,660) in the previous 12 months, had expended less than 10 per cent in relief aid, despite a disastrous slump in the cattle industry. Meanwhile £117 (\$5760) had been taken to pay for compulsory deportations to the new Cape Bedford mission.

A scandal at Wrotham Park station in 1927² indicates how vulnerable Aboriginal workers were physically, as well as financially, to abuse by police protectors. Workers here refused to re-sign without payment of £200

(\$9624) in outstanding wages. The protector threatened the men and women, plied them with alcohol, and locked them in a poisons shed overnight until they capitulated. When an internal police inquiry took no action the story was leaked to the press, prompting the police union to claim its members were being falsely victimised.

Most workers had nowhere to turn with such grievances, although there are rare letters direct to the Chief Protector. Audit officers were appalled that rogue police remained in position. They identified protectors who failed to collect wages, held 'witnessed' withdrawals which had not been endorsed by the worker, colluded with local storekeepers to overcharge for purchases, and charged inflated amounts for clothes and goods obtained second hand (Longreach 1927). Others commonly negotiated contracts for illegally low rates of pay (Winton 1932), or connived with employers to hold preferred workers idle off-season rather than secure the required 12-month contract (Herberton 1935). Bleakley admitted there had been many instances of 'dereliction of duty and abuses' by police protectors, most of whom were not qualified for their Aboriginal duties and all of whom were caught in the conflict between policing and protecting, with the former frequently subordinated to the latter.³

During the 1929 depression the government appropriated Aboriginal savings through a series of extra levies and confiscations,⁴ including a 5 per cent tax on all balances over £20 (\$940) and a 2.5 per cent tax on country accounts. All APF levies and half the annual balance in the APP was seized for consolidated revenue, as well as lump sums from the APP, bringing the fund to the brink of insolvency. Financial records reveal raids on Trust funds since at least

5. QSA A/69452, 15.3.23. *Report on The Office of the Chief Protector of Aborigines*.

1. QSA. Police Circular 21:3.

2. *Queensland Parliamentary Debates*, 1927:308.

3. DAIA RK:11, 20.1.38.

4. Undated memorandum attached to QSA A/58856, 9.11.32.

1925, the Trusts losing a total of £72,000 (\$3.5 million) 'for departmental purposes' in the decade to 1935 and a further £19,000 (\$933,000) taken from Aboriginal earnings. This was never repaid. Subsequently, in contempt of annual protests by auditors, Trust monies continued to be raided for mission and settlement development, wages, forced relocations, and grants to missions.

By the end of 1931 the government was holding more than £290,000 (almost \$16 million) of private savings in 5600 accounts, although, as Bleakely admitted, after 30 years there was still no effective control over the activities of the 95 country protectors. Indeed a new Inquiry in 1932¹ found pilfering from private accounts over long periods was common and declared Aboriginal savings more vulnerable to fraud than any other government accounts. It strongly recommended that workers at least be able to see some record of transactions. This was never implemented. Instead, in a move said to 'go a long way to minimise fraud' by police protectors,² £250,000 (\$14.45 million) of private savings was transferred to head office leaving only a working residue in police hands.

This tactic had little impact on the daily dealings of protectors. But it was a boon for the government which immediately seized £200,000 (\$11.57 million) for investment. This duplicated a long-standing practice of diverting bulk amounts from the APP, the APF and settlement Trust funds (comprising the accumulated savings of inmates) for the purpose of interest revenue. These monies were desperately needed by the impoverished account holders, and the procedure of confiscating the interest bonus,

amounting to £5316 (\$320,500) in 1933, was known to be unauthorised. The retention of majority savings for investment purposes continued into the 1970s.

During the late 1930s Aboriginal employment in the pastoral industry averaged around 5500 workers. Yet the department failed to secure even the discounted wage of 66 per cent, the official scale dropping from 53% (1934, 1935) to only 41% (1938, 1939). Writing in 1934, the United Graziers' Association (UGA) disclosed that in the peninsula and the Gulf 'it is not possible to obtain suitable white men [who] would not take the jobs they were offered.'

Reports³ showed 90 per cent of stations in the Cloncurry area were worked by Aboriginal stockmen in 1936, with most station owners preferring them to white labour, being better stockmen and more reliable.

"It is a well known fact that Aboriginals employed on agreement, work long hours, and with a lot of employers there are no Sundays ... whilst mustering is on, they are out on the runs day and night, and very often their day's work is nearer 16 than 8 hours. The white man would not endure such hardships and long hours ... The wages, more especially to a married Aboriginal, is just a bare existence."

Protectors at Mitchell, Windorah and Turn Off Lagoons endorsed the preference for Aboriginal over white labour. The Norman-ton protector described the gruelling regime on 'most of the stations around here':

"It is freely admitted that the native stockman is last to retire at night and first up in the morning. After his stock duties for the day are finished he makes the fire, carries water, and is at the beck and call of the white men in the camp. In the morning he has the fire going and the horses rounded up before the white stockmen are awake. In addition, it is a general rule for the native

1. QSA A/58856, 9.11.32, *Report on the Inspection of the Office of the Chief Protector of Aboriginals*.

2. Ibid, 15.3.33, Under Secretary William Gall.

3. QSA 1A/29 for these reports.

to ride the highest spirited horses before the white stockman condescends to ride them."

At that time an Aboriginal stockman got less than half the white wage and much of that was in doubt with several protectors adamant that pocket money was never properly paid in their areas.¹ To withdraw money from their own savings workers had to endure the humiliating ritual of going cap in hand to protectors whose arbitrary refusal was common. Head office endorsed rejections even where substantial balances obtained, claiming that a person may have purchased trousers several months previously, might be 'too extravagant' in their request, or was not careful in looking after other possessions.²

Many pastoralists and some protectors regarded Aboriginal children as a commodity. In 1938 the Burketown protector was ordered to relocate 26 destitute people from the north-west stations of Lawn Hill and Westmoreland to the Doomadgee mission. He protested that two boys aged 10 and 11 should remain because, once on the mission, they could refuse station work.³ The mission superintendent pointed out that this protector prohibited 'any native, young or old, from visiting [the mission], even for a few days' during the contract period', and few workers accepted the extended isolation from family and friends. Subsequently the pastoralist condemned the 'clean muster' of the group, protesting 'much work' had already gone into training the boys and their 8-year-old brother.

Poor food and accommodation for Aboriginal, as opposed to white, workers was a further avenue of profit for pastoralists, especially in remote areas where inspections were rare. In some areas, however,

mission contact confirmed workers' awareness of their rights:⁴

"M., like many other employers in this part of the State, have not got out of the way of thinking that 'anything is good enough for a nigger', they do not realise that the natives are gradually becoming more educated ... probably due to the Missions, ... they are obtaining much better treatment, but with the stations which are at a distance from the protectorate office, and whose natives rarely come to town, they receive a bad deal."

Inferior conditions were condoned because, as the UGA astutely observed, 'by employing Aboriginals, the stations concerned are relieving the State of a liability'.

And of course the government directly profited from Aboriginal employment. Despite frequent warnings from auditors that such practices were 'wrong in principle' and 'without the authority of parliament',⁵ it continued to pool levies from Aboriginal income through the department's operational account to mask payments for items which strictly were charges on consolidated revenue. This saved around £19,000 (\$805,600) each year, funding which the government simply refused to provide. It also ignored warnings that every levy and transfer of Aboriginal monies was unlawful after 1939, when all regulations had been temporarily terminated by the *Aboriginals Preservation and Protection Act* and not reinstated. Indeed settlement maintenance levies were judged illegal even under the repealed Acts. (New regulations were not gazetted until 1945.)

1. Ibid.

2. QSA POL 9H/1 Correspondence Win-ton Police Station 1930s & 1940s.

3. DAIA RK:35 7.1.38.

4. DAIA TR1227:209 2.6.41.

5. QSA A/69634 3.4.41.

V. Systemic impoverishment

A new Investigation in 1941¹ was so critical of Bleakley's dereliction of duty he was forced to resign. Records were hopelessly muddled, accounts improperly kept and there were still no internal checks to detect fraud and error in the 40-year system. Further, there was a failure 'to make proper inquiries' to identify relatives entitled to deceased estates. Indeed government raids had reduced the APP to only £1110 in cash plus £2765 in loans to meet a contingent liability of over £74,000 (\$3.6 million) representing thousands of 'unclaimed' workers' balances.²

In 1943 the government created the Aboriginal Welfare Fund (AWF) 'for the benefit of Aborigines generally', parameters wide enough to legitimise the diversion of trust monies to cover development costs of missions and settlements. The AWF absorbed all interest from invested funds, the APF levy, the settlement maintenance levy (on savings of those based on settlements), and proceeds from settlement stores (with profit margins up to 40 per cent) and ventures such as sale of cattle and produce. At times, lump sums from 'unclaimed' deceased estates, and later child endowment and federal housing funds, were all streamed through the AWF. (Pastoral workers have a vested interest in the AWF, which the government continued to exploit until 1993, and for which the government recently proposed a contentious settlement.)

In the 1943/44 year only 17 per cent of private savings was available for private needs, while over £248,000 (\$10.5 million) was committed for investment. At that time pastoral workers got only 39 per cent the white wage, around \$64 per week (today), a loss of about \$44 per week relative to the 66

per cent parity, with a further pocket money loss of up to 75% of wages, or \$48. As a measure to reduce cheating on goods supplied the department suggested setting a cash component. The Coen protector, one of the biggest labour contractors, described the pocket money system as 'just a farce, and is playing into the hands of the white people in general ... the employers have not any interest in the natives whatever, and consequently the cash would not get to the natives, their finger prints would be taken in a cash book and the amount credited against the native, which they would not get.' The Burketown protector agreed: 'if greater amount was given to the Aboriginal concerned, I am of the opinion that 75 per cent of the stations would keep the extra pocket money for themselves.'

Government files confirm continuing exploitation of this labour force: 'An Aboriginal can be equally as good, in fact better, than the majority of European stockmen ... The average cattle man has a tendency to employ cheap labour, and the Aboriginal is his cheap labour, and practically the same amount of work is being done by Aboriginal labour as would be done if Europeans were employed in their place ... the average Aboriginal is a better man for station work' (Georgetown). In Charters Towers graziers preferred Aboriginal labour because they knew the country, adapted better to working conditions and were cheaper. Indeed the AWU confirmed that on many properties 'practically the whole of the labour employed is Aboriginal'. Pastoralists exploited workers' 'ignorance of hours and conditions generally' (Theodore), working them 'time and a half' while on the road with the stock (Burketown), and 'sweating' wives who were required to provide two hours free work but in fact were hostage to their situation: 'Although it is almost impossible to prove it, many of the employers work these gins far in excess of the two hours, and thus do away with the necessity

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1. QSA A/4291 *Investigation into the Sub-department of Native Affairs*
 2. QSA TR254 1B/23 7.5.42.

of employing a further hand' (Gregory Downs).¹

This essential workforce of 4500 in 1949 was contracted by the department at only 31 per cent the white wage in that year, a deficit of over \$340,000 (today) per week compared to the stated ratio, and almost double that compared to the station hands Award. Massive losses through rorted pocket money continued unchecked despite regulations in 1945 to tighten procedures, as this 1956 report from Camooweal shows:²

"Most employers do not keep pocket money books, as they are not practical, and those that do give the books to the natives on termination of employment. The natives invariably state that they thumbprint the books without receiving the money. The employers in such cases state that the natives' account was overdrawn, and this cannot be disputed, as the employer (if he is dishonest) protects himself with false entries in his store account ... My personal views are that pocket money issues to natives are absolutely beyond control, and the native is entirely at the mercy of his employer..."

Similar responses around the State led director Cornelius O'Leary to concede 'that in many instances pocket money is not paid and the Aboriginal thereby deprived of portion of his earnings'. Calculating the loss at 50 per cent across the workforce³ gives a total in today's value of almost \$17 million stripped from the 4500 workers for the 1956 year alone, with a further deficit of \$6.24 million to the stated wage parity and another \$1.25 million by the APF levy.

In 1956 the department was so eager to profit from almost £532,000 (\$10 million) of private savings diverted to investment that it amended regulations to *offer* this

money for the expansion projects of regional hospitals,⁴ from which Aboriginal people were routinely excluded. At the same time, rural families, barred by regulation from rental or hotel accommodation, struggled in appalling conditions in pastoral camps or on rural reserves controlled by the department. Almost without exception these were overcrowded, decrepit and unsanitary. Frequently the department refused to upgrade them despite knowledge that children were thereby denied schooling, as was the case at Ravenshoe in 1953:⁵

"Their present hovels are dank, musky and unhealthy and their living conditions unsanitary in every way ... all water has to be carried up a steep grade by men, women and children. The children are denied the right to education, being debarred from the local state school because of the disgraceful and unsavoury homes from which they come."

The department said it had 'neither the funds nor the resources' to provide standard amenities, instead opting to remove the families to a government settlement. These compulsory removals were, in all likelihood, financed improperly from the Welfare Fund, a practice continued into the 1970s.⁶ In 1958 O'Leary admitted that 'industrious and hardworking men of good standing with families and money' had no option but to remain on the Birdsville reserve, where squalor was so bad the children suffered continual gastroenteritis and skin infections and were banned from school.⁷

To allay public condemnation the department at times raided the wages of local workers to finance shelter, fencing and amenities on rural reserves. 'Consent' was

1. All quotes from QSA 1A/29.

2. QSA TR254 1D/106, 1956.

3. Pocket money ranged between 33%-75%, making 54% the half-way mark. Wages were only 55% the white rate.

4. QSA TR254 1A/188 14.9.56.

5. DAIA 7C/14 9.3.53.

6. For details of entrenched misuse of the Aboriginal Welfare Fund see articles on www.linksdisk.com/roskidd.

7. QSA 1D/145 14.8.58.

purportedly obtained although people were pursued for years to pay their share; yet workers rarely stayed on the reserves which overwhelmingly were home to the unemployed and the elderly. In the late 1940s money was taken for sheds and toilets at Charters Towers and £258 (\$8633) for huts to replace those destroyed by cyclone at Cooktown. In the early 1950s £3000 (\$62,340) was taken for huts and amenities at Normanton through a 5 per cent levy on savings accounts. People on the Cloncurry reserve also 'made available' considerable amounts from their accounts for amenities, and in 1947 every worker 'was compelled to contribute' to a house costing £450 (\$18,000) for Aboriginal accommodation in the town; it was riddled with termites and cost a further £50 to demolish two years later.¹

When the department announced an increase in the minimum wage in 1957, the UGA challenged the department's authority to do so, threatened a mass retrenchment of stockmen, and claimed deceitfully that black stockmen 'do not compare with experienced white stockmen'. The department's inspector disputed the claims, noting a 'marked and growing reluctance' of white stockmen to work in remote areas:²

"It is becoming increasingly apparent that the continuance of pastoral pursuits depends on Aboriginal stockmen ... most graziers appear more concerned with obtaining Aboriginal labour as cheaply as possible than with paying wages in terms of the real worth ... white men of markedly less ability and industry [are] receiving higher wages and better living conditions than Aboriginals who are better workmen." Employees' wives, whose unpaid labour was now capped at 12 hours per week, continued to be exploited, as were children whose labour was entrenched in the indus-

try, despite an official minimum age of 14 years. In 1957 O'Leary conceded many were injured, needing medical attention for broken limbs, and counselled graziers against using 'undersized and weedy' children for hard labour, observing 'We try to look on these people as human beings'.³ The UGA wanted children from at least 12 years, when they were 'more interested' and might grow up in 'the right surroundings' rather than be 'ruined' by mission life.

The files abound with reports of appalling abuses including sexual assaults, wet living quarters, rough handling, brutality with chains, poor rations, lack of clean water and cooking sheds, and widespread hookworm and ill health, especially among children. Workers who walked off bad jobs were pursued by police and forcibly returned. Many protectors ignored Aboriginal complaints, labelling them as untrue, unsubstantiated or merely vindictive. Such blatant contraventions of regulated conditions were rarely challenged; few police protectors had the time or the inclination to check outlying cattle stations. In 1956 the department arranged that industrial inspectors of white accommodation could also check that 'fair treatment' obtained for Aboriginal workers. But little changed.

The proposed wage rise was not introduced until 1961, by which time the UGA had engineered a reduction in hourly rates, and re-assigned the workforce on lower pay, generating a £2 million (\$34 million) profit, according to TLC calculations.⁴ Another tactic to minimise wages included the 'active/non-active' category whereby wages of men over forty-five could be reduced by almost half. The TLC denounced these wage discounts as 'scandalous' and 'inconsistent with public utterances' about fostering assimilation, but director Patrick Killoran feigned impotence,

1. QSA TR254 7C/8 (i) 10.2.47.

2. QSA TR254 1A/29 22.10.56.

3. QSA TR1227:258 23.1.57.

4. QSA TR254 1A/29 15.11.61.

alleging that rates were 'determined by the Industrial Court' and were not 'an arbitrary decision by a Government or a Department.'¹

A further scam was use of the tag of 'slow worker'; indeed in 1964 the UGA alleged that 'practically all aboriginals' came under this category. Activated with AWU consent, this only required a protector to prevail upon a worker to 'agree' that his capacity was diminished and endorse his contract accordingly. The UGA blocked TLC proposals that an industrial magistrate be empowered to judge Aboriginal ability, protesting that streaming Aboriginal station hands onto normal pay would cause 'major complications' logging overtime, sick leave, etc.; not to mention difficulties under the *Workers' Accommodation Act* which stipulated that 'white workers should not have to live in the same sleeping accommodation or eat in the same dining room as coloured workers'.²

By 1964 Queensland considered it was not politically prudent to oppose the push for equal wages, but Killoran calculated his department could retain control of most employment. A TLC submission³ catalogues the gross disadvantage: the ration scale for whites listed 52 items, compared to 17 for Aboriginal workers; holidays were 3 weeks compared to one; Aboriginal workers had no provision for sick or long service leave; overtime was far lower; wives were still required to work 12 hours a week for rations; Aboriginal workers received no permanent record of wages earned and paid nor any record of deductions made, amounts remitted to the protector or indeed any record of accrued earnings. And after more than 60 years in operation, the wages system was still judged 'too open to abuse' because, as a Public Service Inspection

admonished, employers paid only on demand from the protector.

The 1965 *Aboriginal Affairs Act* defined every Aboriginal a 'free citizen' unless deemed in need of 'assistance' (that is, everyone not yet 'exempted' from department controls). Aboriginal property and accounts could still be taken possession of, retained or sold at the director's discretion. Workers could now see their passbooks showing transactions on their accounts, although financial control was retained by the State. Investment holdings at this time totalled \$1.56 million (\$12.46 million), with the government pocketing \$38,218 (\$305,360) in 'surplus interest'.

Award rates now became mandatory except where Aboriginal workers were specifically excluded – effectively almost the whole workforce. New regulations in 1966 continued to defer to the UGA in the underpayment of Aboriginal station hands. Indeed, prime minister Robert Menzies had confidentially assured Queensland's premier Frank Nicklin that equal wages would only apply to former wards. All those still under State control could be covered by the 'slow worker' clause, and full wages for these 'trainees' could be phased in 'over time'.⁴ Meanwhile the 5000 pastoral workers struggled on 72 per cent of the award wage, losing an estimated \$67,500 (\$523,800) per week to pocket money fraud which auditors stated was still unchecked. A further \$5000 (\$38,800) weekly was stripped out of their earnings into the Welfare Fund. Full wages did not become mandatory until 1968.

It was not until 1972 that workers could request permission to control their own accounts, unless a magistrate upheld an objection from the Director as to their capacity to do so. Audits show the government still had \$952,370 (\$6.14 million) of savings invested. Only now were Aboriginal workers finally safe from compulsory

1. *ibid*, 9.11.64.

2. *ibid*.

3. *ibid*, 6.7.64.

4. *ibid*, 18.5.65.

relocations, contracted employment and government levies. 'For the first time', reported the department's Coen manager, 'men did not have to go to a station if they did not want to ... if they feel they have not been fairly treated, or have not been paid'. Workers were no longer 'owned' by particular stations which frequently put them off in slack times in breach of long term contracts, 'to leave their men simply sit in the reserve until they needed them'. Elderly family members and wives who had been compelled to work for free on the stations could now also refuse exploitation: 'Pensioners are coming in to sit down, this is hitting the stations, and most of the women will not now go out as they never got pay only food.' Pastoralists were angry: 'there was a lot of local tension to put it very mildly.'¹

The early 1970s was a period of upheaval for Aboriginal pastoral workers. Many were laid off when award wages became mandatory, others were displaced because of increasing mechanisation in the industry, and the severe downturn due to international competition. For many Aboriginal people in the north, this is remembered as the most destructive in living memory.² Freedom of movement and declining employment led to a concentration of families in towns and fringe settlements.

By the late 1970s most stations around Coen employed only stockworkers and often for just a three-month period, although several pensioners took low-paid yard work as a way of keeping contact with their country. During 1979 and 1980, however, all local men were again in full employment, and youngsters were out on the stations training.

1. QSA TR254 9L/57 1.5.74.

2. Sutton, P, 'The Politics of Suffering: Indigenous Policy in Australia since the Seventies', proposed paper for *Anthropological Forum*, 11:2, November 2001.

VI. Settling the accounts

Fred Edwards is a respected elder from Normanton, and he is a frustrated man. He has worked for 50 years on stations around the Gulf, yet he doesn't have enough money to repair his car. He officially started work at twelve, but as he said: 'Most people were born on the station, grew up on the station and as we were growing up we were just thrown straight into the saddle and doing stock work and all that.' There were no holidays other than a weekends at Christmas and the August races.

He had no control over his employment. 'We were kicked around like animals', he says, 'no matter what the circumstance was you had to put up with whatever.' Physical abuse was common, 'we were flogged for anything and then chased off the place', but if they went into town they'd get locked up by police and sent straight out again.

He never got his wages, and remembers the humiliation of going to the courthouse where they'd write orders for rations or clothes. 'What do you want this for', they demanded, 'You take what we're going to give you'. At times he would ask if he could get perhaps £10 of his savings, to be told that one pound was enough; or ask for a clothes order for two or three items, to be told, 'No, you just get one of each.' The courthouse would ring the stores saying: 'we're sending so and so down there and if he doesn't turn up let us know'.

They were continually told they hadn't earned their keep. Yet, as Fred rightly insists, it was 'the blackfellas who put the stations there', labouring in groups of 20 or 30 in the stock camps, just for bread and beef, doing the hardest work: 'A lot of the white stockmen would never ever do what we did.'

Fred remembers paying his share for four huge buildings on the Normanton reserve which were later sold to the Council when the department forced everyone off the site.

It was our money, he said, 'I'd like to get my share of that money back.'

Fred is now in his early 60s, and his wife Gladys nearly ten years older. Gladys spent most of her childhood 'on her hands and knees scrubbing, in and out of stations', backbreaking work for all young girls. Like his family and friends, they are in desperate straits, despite the fact that Fred slaved all his life. They are paying off their house, furniture and a replacement engine for the car. He's in desperate need of cash but the bank just knocked him back because he doesn't have a job in the slack season. He suffers from arthritis, asthma and diabetes, and rightly says he should be retired with his feet up. As it is, he'll have to 'throw a saddle on the horse again' when the season picks up. He has to 'go on slaving ... until I can't stand up to it anymore I suppose'.

In May 2002 the Beattie Labor government acknowledged 'the lasting pain' caused by decades of financial controls. The premier said he was 'generous' in offering a payment of \$4000 to workers over 50 years, and half that to those less than 50 who worked 'under the Acts'. Claimants have to sign an indemnity to shield the government against further legal actions, but the government refuses to supply all their financial records, and none would have any idea if the wealth of incriminating evidence detailing government negligence and malpractice. To validate the indemnity the government is paying allegedly 'independent' legal advisers, but these operatives have been instructed to discuss only the government offer. Most workers thereby remain ignorant of their real entitlement and their best interests.

'It reminds me of the olden days', Fred says, 'we've just got to take what's given'. He knows he has been 'ripped off', and he wants to get all his money back, but thinks that \$10,000 or \$12,000 might be fair compensation for decades of work. He wants to claim for his deceased parents and elder

brother whose lifetime earnings also disappeared into the system, but this is expressly proscribed under the terms of the offer.

Fred says his life would have 'balanced' if he had been paid his wages during his working life, and his initial response was to reject the paltry payment. He knows that several lawyers have volunteered to work pro bono for people wanting to pursue full compensation through the courts. But he says he has 'no option' but to take what's offered – 'at least I get something while I'm alive'. He says the \$4000 is nothing really, and he'd like it to be a downpayment. 'Very sad, you know, people like me who have got to accept that sort of money when you've been a slave all your life.'

VII. Conclusion

Successive Queensland governments have profited extensively through their handling of the wages and savings of generations of indentured pastoral labourers during the twentieth century. Autocratic controls introduced in 1897 and refusal to allow either personal or external scrutiny facilitated frauds, incompetence, negligence and illegal dealings which deprived workers of millions of dollars. File evidence confirms that administrations knew of malpractices for decades but refused to implement safeguards to protect the finances of these wards of State. It is clear the government itself has diverted private savings and Trust funds to cover State obligations and to generate profit for the State.

Plundering of pastoral earnings and entitlements was multi-faceted: setting the 66 per cent parity in 1919; failure to enforce that parity in every year between 1931-1961; failure to demand wage for known worth; failure to implement pocket money safeguards; failure to prevent endemic police fraud; imposing levies which were then corrupted to profit the State; failure to allow workers free use of their savings; seizure of bulk savings for State enrichment; failure to

distribute deceased estates; failure to pass on full child endowment and pensions; failure to enforce workplace terms and conditions; banning workers from standard rural accommodation and refusal to provide alternative standard amenities on reserves, to name the most obvious.

Thousands of Aboriginal men and women worked for decades, many on country they have always claimed as their own. Evidence shows many were highly skilled long term employees. There is little doubt that many would have successfully bid for management or ownership of rural properties if the State had not purloined their earnings on a massive scale.

What is needed now – and in every State – is an independent Inquiry to reveal the full histories of labour and financial controls of Aboriginal wards and to assess equitable compensation. As Fred Edwards says, the Queensland premier must feel guilty now he knows the facts. It is time for him – and every other premier – to come clean.

** Ros Kidd undertook a Bachelor of Arts and Honours degree at Griffith University Queensland as a mature-age student. She was awarded a doctorate in 1994 for her thesis Regulating Bodies: administrations and Aborigines in Queensland 1840-1988. The evidence Ros provided as expert witness to the 1996 HREOC Inquiry into underpayment of wages to Aboriginal employees on Queensland reserves (the Palm Island Inquiry) demolished the Crown's case, ultimately leading to reparations of \$7000 to each claimant, a total payout nearing \$40 million. Her work was also cited by the Premier in his current offer of \$55.6 million to settle claims for 'Stolen Wages'. She argues that such payments are a travesty of real value owing, and that until governments nationally give a full public accounting for the wages and entitlements of former wards there should be no limitation on claims for monies owing. Ros*

actively works with legal teams fighting for justice on the Stolen Wages. As a freelance historian consultant, Ros has worked for the Indigenous Crime Taskforce, the Stolen Children Inquiry, the Forde Inquiry into Abuse of Children in State Institutions, the Cape York Justice Study, and the Bringing Them Home Oral History Project. She provides evidence in support of Native Title claims. She is a member of AIATSIS; Adjunct Senior Lecturer, Griffith University; Member at Large, Australians for Native Title and Reconciliation (ANTaR) (National); Patron, ANTaR (Queensland); Member, Professional Historians Association (Queensland) Inc; Member, Royal Historical Society of Queensland. For more, contact Ros Kidd www.linksdisk.com/roskidd

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** Endnote: Conversions in the text are obtained by using the following methodology. Using the Retail Price index numbers: divide today's rate by the target year rate, multiply by the amount in pounds and multiply by two to convert to dollars if appropriate. Note: this is a value conversion only. A 2001 Proposal for NSW Cabinet recommended a 'fair value' ratio provided by Ernst & Young that factored in interest rate options and an allowance for 'opportunity cost'. This ratio is far higher than my conversions.*