

'FOR THEIR OWN BENEFIT'? A CRITICAL OVERVIEW OF ABORIGINAL POLICY AND PRACTICE AT MOOLA BULLA, EAST KIMBERLEY, 1910-1955.

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This paper seeks to document and explain why one of the original intentions behind the proposal in 1909 to establish Moola Bulla, designated at different times as a 'Native Station and Settlement', a 'Cattle Station' and a 'Native Station',¹ 'to be worked by the natives for their own benefit'² was only ever realised in part and why the recommendation to close the station was reached in 1954.³ Through an analysis of archival materials, supplemented by reminiscences of some of those who lived and worked at Moola Bulla, this paper attempts to assess the ways in which policies of control and management of Aboriginal people were implemented at one specific locality in the East Kimberley region of Western Australia.⁴

This view from the archival record reveals a number of issues concerning the development of Aboriginal policy and practice in the north of the state. Firstly, it shows how the plan for a specific strategy of control evolved over several years from a number of different sources and how both the ideas and actions of field agents in the north differed from those of administrators and politicians in the south. As a result, the purpose of an institution such as Moola Bulla seems always to have been dogged with ambivalence, depending from whose perspective its history is read. Contradictions over the years between official policy and actual practice are clearly evident. Secondly, the archival record of Moola Bulla is revealing for what it says about prevailing attitudes concerning the future of Aboriginal people. From the belief that Aborigines were dying out to the acceptance that they were not, archival materials relating to Moola Bulla show how policies and practices accommodated to such changing beliefs. In particular, it is interesting to note how views about the labour force potential of Aboriginal people developed, as well as how the administrative problem posed by increasing numbers of people of mixed descent was dealt with. The paper aims to show that, official rhetoric to the contrary notwithstanding, Moola Bulla was established, worked, maintained and disposed of not for the benefit of Aboriginal

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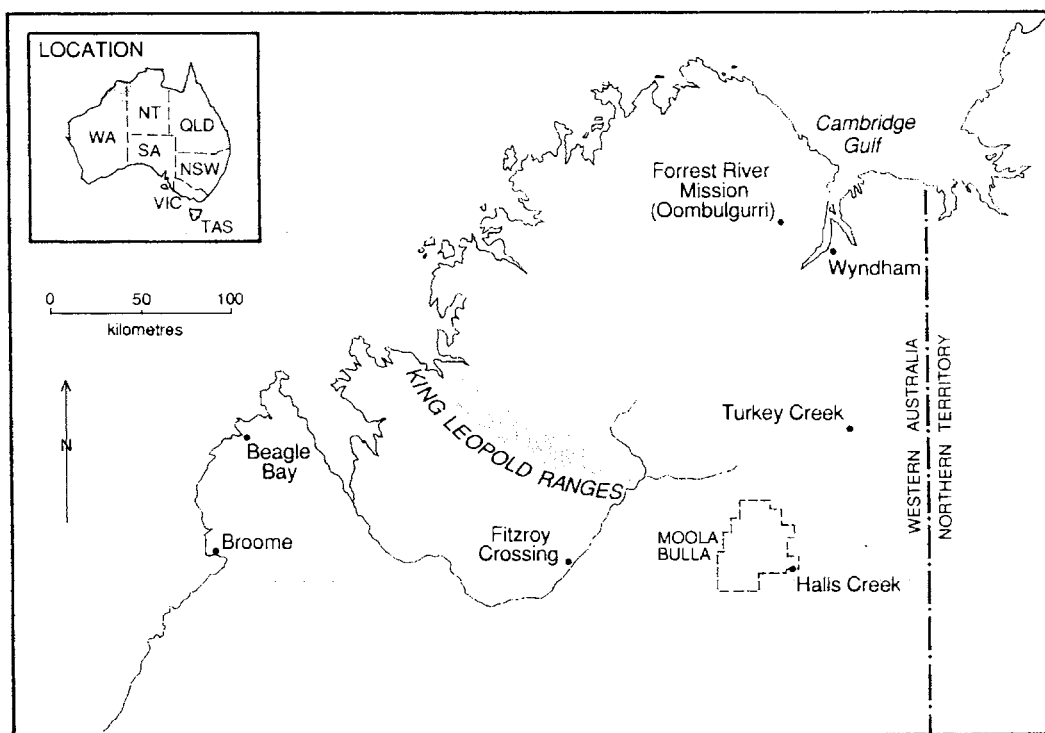
1 Annual Reports (AR) of the Department of Aborigines/Natives Affairs.

2 Moola Bulla native station No 653, 95/18:6

3 AR 1954.

4 This paper forms part of a broader piece of research on the archival and oral history of Moola Bulla. The present paper represents an overview based on archival sources. More details of Aboriginal perspectives are contained in recordings made and held by the Kimberley Language Resource Centre, Hall's Creek, WA (see Toussaint 1988; Wrigley, 1988).

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Moola Bulla and the Kimberleys, WA. Drawn by Ian Heywood, Cartography Unit, RSPacS., ANU.

people, but for the benefit of the pastoral industry and the state government treasury.⁵

Moola Bulla undoubtedly played a significant part both in the lives of many Aboriginal people in the East Kimberley, as well as in the pastoral industry in the north of the state. In 1952 it was reported that the station had the largest concentration of 'natives' in the State,⁶ yet some three years later the property had been sold fairly abruptly by the government to a private pastoralist and the Aboriginal population had been relocated.

Most accounts of the formation of Moola Bulla stress its intended primary function of resolving the problem of cattle killing by Aborigines in the East Kimberley.⁷ The government's growing concern at this time to appease the pastoral lobby by reducing the increasing Aboriginal depredations on cattle in the area appears to have been the catalyst, yet the idea of forming a 'native settlement' had existed for a number of years. In a letter in

⁵ A similar conclusion was reached in part by Biskup in a newspaper article published some six years after Moola Bulla was sold: 'Moola Bulla had never been an institution run primarily for the benefit of the natives: it was, in fact, established in the interests of the East Kimberley pastoral industry ...' (*West Australian*, 28 August 1961).

⁶ AR 1952.

⁷ Biskup 1973; Bolton 1953; Long 1970; Rowley 1970.

1901 to H.C. Prinsep, the Chief Protector of Aborigines, C.J. Annear, the telegraph stationmaster at Fitzroy and an agent of the Aborigines' Department, pointed out that:

Relief to the infirm, under the present system, will doubtless become more costly each year, and I think everyone knowing this country agrees that the Government have a difficult problem to solve in dealing with the natives, but one which all agree should be taken in hand as soon as possible.

As a means of minimising, if not entirely doing away with, the loss at present entailed by supplying relief to the infirm natives and those requiring it temporarily...and as means of improving the welfare of the natives generally.

[T]he Government [should] set apart a sufficient area, erect suitable buildings thereon, say, for a staff of three or four men, and place upon it stock likely to be remunerative. A suitable site...could be found at the foot of the Leopold Range, close to the Hall's Creek telegraph line, and about 50 miles East of here. To make this Institution self-supporting, I would suggest that horses, cows and the Angora goat for breeding purposes be placed upon it. There is always a ready sale for horses and cattle, and the hair of the Angora is a valuable commodity. I firmly believe that this suggestion, if adopted, and placed in charge of an honest and intelligent officer, and worked on business lines would, in the course of a few years, pay its expenses, and leave a fair sum to go towards relief elsewhere.

[T]he natives at present receiving relief here or anywhere within a radius of sixty miles could be concentrated there, thereby doing away with relief at many places.⁸

The main concerns behind Annear's suggestion at this time centred on the cost and efficiency of providing relief to indigent Aborigines. Although cattle-killing by Aborigines had been a growing problem to settlers in the Kimberley during the last decade of the 19th century, this was not specifically mentioned by Annear as prompting his suggestion. Some local officials, such as Annear, recognised, albeit paternalistically, the necessity of providing relief to Aborigines whose lands were being alienated, whose natural foods were rapidly declining and who were contracting a variety of introduced diseases.

At about the same time, police were becoming increasingly engaged in patrolling and protecting the property of settlers and arresting Aborigines for cattle killing. They concurred in the general idea of setting aside land for Aborigines for rather different reasons than those mentioned by Annear. Prinsep noted a report from the constable at Argyle Police Station:

... a large reserve being made for aboriginal purposes,...would be a good thing not only for the natives but for the district generally, as it would be the means of keeping the natives under continual supervision of police, and away from the stocked or cattle country, thus being an advantage to the various landholders.⁹

In his 1903 Annual Report, the Chief Protector of Aborigines gave a further reason for the formation of a 'native settlement' in the Kimberley:

The present Resident Magistrate and Medical Officer [in Wyndham] has again urged the formation of a large native settlement in the unoccupied country west of Cambridge Gulf. The time will come when something will have to be done in the way of collecting natives on certain portions of the Kimberley districts, and, if possible, training them to be of service, and to earn their

⁸ AR 1901:10.

⁹ AR 1902.

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living by their labour; and I would recommend that an area be decided upon and reserved from anything but temporary occupation, so as to be available in the future.¹⁰

This need to consider the work potential of Aborigines was reiterated in the 1904 Annual Report of the Chief Protector of Aborigines in a section referring to the East Kimberley. With reference to 'the native question', Prinsep noted that:

... much attention has been called to the necessity of preserving such a valuable source of labour for the future, looking at the question in a practical manner, aside from its humane aspect.¹¹

Cattle killing became increasingly prevalent in the Kimberley during the first years of the 20th century as European settlement increased and Aboriginal people were increasingly alienated from their land. Some police considered that cattle killing resulted from:

...the leniency of the magistrates towards native offenders, who formerly received sentences of about two years, but now in most cases a sentence of one to six months is inflicted.¹²

Others appeared to show a greater understanding of the situation when they attributed it 'to the scarcity of bush food'.¹³

Government relief measures were not able to cope with the food problem and Aborigines in many localities were becoming dependent on settlers killing beef for them. After his appointment as Chief Protector of Aborigines in 1907, C.F. Gale took up the challenge of dealing with 'the native question' in the Kimberley somewhat more vigorously than had his predecessor. In his 1908 Annual Report, he dealt with a number of specific matters, including those of 'Rationing Indigent Natives' and 'Kimberley District and Cattle Killing'. On the first of these, he found the system of rationing to be unsatisfactory from an administrative point of view and noted that:

The question of establishing reserves where natives can be kept and rationed is one that has been under consideration for many years past...the initial expense of a scheme of this sort will be great, but ... will be far cheaper in the long run than the present system.

The Government have...power to resume any lands for the benefit of the aborigines, and there is no reason...why industries, whether agricultural, pastoral, or both, should not be worked by the natives under Government supervision. Farms and stations could be established throughout the State where the old could be cared for, and the young taught to become useful servants...these stations...could eventually be made self-supporting.

These Government institutions would become a labour-recruiting station
...¹⁴

On the second of these matters, Gale noted an increase in the numbers of Aborigines in the Kimberley being convicted of cattle killing or 'being in unlawful possession of meat'. He went on to point out that:

10 AR 1903.

11 AR 1904.

12 AR 1906.

13 Ibid.

14 AR 1908.

our present system of punishment is not acting as a deterrent to this form of crime: many holding the opinion that natives look upon a term of imprisonment as more of a holiday than anything else.¹⁵

Furthermore, Gale noted the high costs of transporting Aboriginal prisoners and keeping them in gaol and stated that such figures formed:

another strong argument in favour of creating the station reserves... General complaints are continually being made by pastoralists in the Kimberley division of the depredations committed by natives among the cattle herds, and I feel sure that any scheme advanced by the Government that would have a tendency to decrease this form of crime would be hailed with delight by those engaged in the industry.¹⁶

Responses from pastoralists to a request in 1908 from Gale asking them to indicate whether they would be prepared to kill enough beef (either gratis or for compensation) to satisfy the needs of Aborigines in country surrounding their stations had apparently been discouraging.¹⁷

In 1909, Gale considered that cattle killing was the most serious question in Aboriginal affairs facing the government at that time. In addition, he pointed out:

Our native gaols are full to overflowing, and their upkeep is an enormous yearly expense to the country.¹⁸

During this same year, the suggestion was again put forward that the government purchase a cattle station 'on behalf of the natives'. This time, a seven-page special report outlining the case and detailing a specific proposal was put forward to the Premier, to the Minister in charge of the Aborigines' Department and to Gale, the Chief Protector, by James Lisdell, a travelling inspector in the Kimberley. Lisdell's proposal recommended:

a new and I am sure a beneficial and successful departure from the present system of treating bush natives.¹⁹

It was the result, he wrote, of:

a careful study of the present unsatisfactory position of the bush natives, the unavoidable but heavy expenditure in relieving indigents, the great prevalence of cattle killing, the large percentage of natives being sent to prison weekly, the utter uselessness of that system of punishment as a deterrent and the large expenditure of public money in Police and prison charges, for which no money is received²⁰

If Lisdell's reasons are indicative, it would seem that he gave as great, if not greater, emphasis to the situation of Aborigines as he did to that of the pastoralists. In fact, Lisdell's proposal went far beyond addressing the single issue of reducing Aboriginal depredations on settlers' stock. In his explicit recognition of the reasons for these killings and the inevitable consequences which were, at that time, flowing from them, Lisdell's views were both critical of government and sympathetic to Aborigines:

Unfortunately through want of forethought past Governments have totally ignored the aborigines in dealing with the pastoral lands of East and West

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid.

17 Bolton, 1953:149.

18 AR 1909.

19 Moola Bulla native station file No. 653,95/18.

20 Ibid.

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Kimberley, with the present consequence of forcing the bush natives to raid the cattle, simply because there is no other meat for them.

[P]ast governments have leased all the best of the pastoral lands and river frontages, without giving the slightest consideration to the requirements of the few thousand bush natives. There is not a single acre of the country - not a single foot of river frontages that the natives can call their own... In the early days, before the country was stocked...both Kimberleys were a paradise for natives, and all varieties of meat could be caught, with very little labour... Stocking up of the country has completely destroyed and hunted all the ground game... They have no meat, so is it any wonder they have taken to cattle killing... If in the early days, before stocking up took place, the Government had reserved large blocks of good virgin country, every 150 miles apart, where there was plenty of natural food, the present unsatisfactory state of affairs and heavy gaol, Police, and indigent expenses would not exist. There is nothing to be gained now by resumption, and the creation of large native reserves, simply because there is nothing on them to eat. Now the only real and economical remedy is to feed the natives with their own meat and self grown vegetables.²¹

Paternalistic in flavour, Lisdell's proposal seems to have resulted from a pragmatic yet somewhat humanitarian assessment of the situation which had developed in the area. Lisdell reported that he had already located suitable station properties near Hall's Creek which the owners wanted to sell and which he suggested that the government purchase 'on behalf of the natives'. The fact that tentative negotiations were already under way earlier in 1909 is evident not only from Lisdell's letter, but also from Gale's Annual Report:

I am pleased to say that the suggestion of forming native settlements is receiving that consideration from the government which it deserves, and any scheme aiming in the direction of keeping the natives from this continuous cattle-killing, and thereby emptying our native gaols, must commend itself to anyone giving the matter the deep thought necessary to grasp the present most unsatisfactory conditions existing between the Government, the native race, and those who are developing the cattle and other industries.²²

During the latter half of 1909, investigations proceeded on valuing the properties, stock and gear, ascertaining the anticipated costs and savings of the proposal. Eventually in February 1910, a lump sum offer was made by the government to Messrs Meinsen, Green and Shepherd, the respective owners of Nicholson Plains, Greenvale and Mary Downs stations near Hall's Creek. The sentiments expressed by Gale in 1910 in advising the government of the advisability of going ahead with the project reflect views prevalent among many government officials at that time:

I feel confident that under careful management, the settlement will become self supporting almost at once. It would tend to make the aborigines more contented with their lot, as they would then have a home where the young and old might be cared for, and where the adults could find employment and provisions when they required them.

History, I suppose will repeat itself, and in the course of time the native race will be a thing of the past. When this happens the Government, by purchasing the above properties will have the satisfaction of knowing that

21 Ibid.

22 AR 1909.

they have done their best for the amelioration of a decadent race, and future Governments will have a valuable asset to dispose of, when this state of things comes to pass.²³

Some of the contradictions and ironies which underlay the formulation of Aboriginal policy and which were to become more apparent over the years of Moola Bulla's existence can already be detected in statements such as these. Local agents, inspectors and others in the Kimberley had been urging the formation of a 'native settlement' in the area for a variety of reasons. But their expressed concerns with the welfare of Aborigines became overshadowed by the government's need to satisfy the pastoralists and reduce the costs of Aboriginal administration. On the one hand, Gale was predicting the demise of the Aboriginal population and he thus indicated that a 'native settlement' in the Kimberley would go some way to 'smooth the pillow of the dying race'. On the other hand, Gale argued that such settlements would be valuable in their capacity as training and recruitment centres for Aboriginal employment in pastoral and domestic work.

The government was evidently convinced that the enterprise would be a good commercial proposition. Its offer was accepted and possession taken of the three stations in August 1910. The property totalled an estimated 860,000 acres and contained over 11,000 head of cattle and 283 horses. It was estimated that up to 600 Aborigines would come within the influence of the settlement. The first manager was a former stock inspector, A. Haly. The settlement was initially known as Nicholson Plains Station, then Mount Barrett Station, and by 1911 was being referred to as Moola Bulla. It is not altogether clear what the precise origin and meaning of the name is. One source states that the name meant 'plenty tucker' and was suggested by Daisy Bates.²⁴ Another source taken from an Aboriginal oral history suggests something quite different.

Old man, call im Boolabulla, kangaroo ibin cookim. Mr Haly bin come from old station, find im old Boolabulla cookim kangaroo the end of the creek ...

Ibin ask im... 'What's your name?' 'Boolabulla'. Im bin call im Moola Bulla.

Mr Haly bin say 'I'll call im Moola Bulla now this one country' he bin say.²⁵

Haly wasted no time in undertaking improvements to the property. Buildings, windmills and paddocks were erected and wells deepened. Cattle were variously branded, speyed, sold or slaughtered. Haly was particularly enthusiastic about the possibilities and importance of horse-breeding, an activity which he had earlier stressed because of what he considered the eminent suitability of the property for such a purpose. In his view, Moola Bulla could potentially supply sufficient horses to meet police requirements for the whole of the north of the state as well as the annual demand in the Kimberley.²⁶ Haly's first Annual Report contained some interesting observations about relations between Whites and Aboriginal people:

[E]very encouragement has been given them to come in and settle here. Beef has been supplied to them according to the number in camp, at times as many as three beasts a day being killed. Tobacco has also been supplied at the rate of one stick per week to each adult. For years the natives have been hunted by the police and imprisoned for cattle killing, and at the start we had great

23 Moola Bulla native station file No. 653, 95/18.

24 Biskup 1973:100.

25 Transcript of oral history (Toby) taken by Audrey Bolger at Kunja camp, near Hall's Creek, 20 March 1982.

26 Moola Bulla native station file No. 653 95/18.

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difficulty in overcoming their suspicions and persuading them they had nothing to fear in settling here...unscrupulous travellers spread dreadful tales amongst them of the ultimate intentions of the Government, which tended to make them unsettled and suspicious. However a great deal of this has been overcome and the radius of the settlement's influence is gradually extending...during the past month there has been quite 300 settled here ...

As much work as possible has been got out of the natives. All the stockwork is done by native boys under the supervision of a head stockman. A large number have been employed round the head station assisting men doing improvements, while native women look after the milking cows and goats, water the large vegetable garden, do the house work and assist generally. The camp natives gather firewood each morning, before being supplied with beef.²⁷

It should be noted that payment for such employment was only in the form of rations, such as beef, flour, sugar, tea and/or blankets and clothing. Minimal cash wages were not paid until after the Second World War, and award wages were not introduced until 1968, through the Federal Pastoral Industry Award.

Haly concluded his first report with the observation that results so far at the settlement had been satisfactory. No complaints of cattle killing in the vicinity of Hall's Creek had been laid during the twelve months since the establishment of Moola Bulla. Gale's Annual Report for the same year contained the following additional observations:

As it will be impossible to keep all the natives constantly employed on the station,...it is further proposed to train the children to become useful servants, and the settlement will eventually become a labour-recruiting centre for the adjoining stations.²⁸

In noting 'the earnest desire' of the Government to foster further development in the Kimberleys and the need to endeavour to improve relations between 'the Government, the native race and those who by their capital and labour are trying to develop the cattle and other industries in the Northern portion of the State', Gale urged the establishment of further settlements like Moola Bulla.

By 1912, Gale believed that 'the native settlement scheme' at Moola Bulla had proved itself successful. Cattle killing in the vicinity was decreasing and hence government expenses for gaoling Aborigines were significantly reduced. This same year, a 'native feeding depot' was established at Violet Valley near Turkey Creek (see map) with the aim of further reducing depredations on stock by killing beef supplied from Moola Bulla.

In his 1913 Annual Report to the Chief Protector 'relative to the condition, treatment, feeding, etc., of the Aborigines on Moola Bulla station', Haly noted:

that as times goes on the natives are realising more and more that Moola Bulla Station is there for their special benefit...the number of natives in camp has greatly increased... Besides killing for them at the homestead the natives were encouraged to assemble at the various yards where the mustering parties were at work and fed there, thus avoiding the concentration of too many in one camp.²⁹

Like most other government employees and pastoralists, Haly failed to appreciate the significance of hunting dogs kept by Aboriginal people. He regarded the number of dogs

27 Moola Bulla native station file No. 652/993.

28 AR 1910.

29 Moola Bulla native station file No.662/14.



'Moola Bulla pastoral station: station homestead' c. 1910-1918. Courtesy Battye Library.



'Moola Bulla pastoral station: working with cattle' 1916. Courtesy Battye Library.

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kept by Aborigines to be a serious problem, but realised that any action on his part to interfere with them on the station would be met with resentment and suspicion. So he suggested that:

The police could greatly assist us by making patrols and when coming upon natives' camps away from the station break all spears and shoot all dogs and start the natives into the station. I feel that after a time the natives would learn that it was to their best interests to remain at the station.³⁰

Haly further reported that over thirty 'native boys' were employed 'stockkeeping, and mustering, branding, horsebreaking, butchering', while 'a large number of camp natives' had been employed cutting and stacking bush hay for the dry season. Blankets and clothing were being distributed 'as an extra means of inducing the natives to visit the station'.³¹

Some of these comments about the means whereby Aboriginal people were induced to visit and settle at the station are borne out by an elderly Aboriginal man living at Hall's Creek in the early 1980s:

Old Haly would make drop of tea and cake, everything you know, people would work with cook trying to get you there. He bringinim every wild people from out at hill, they got no clothes. They got something like that, you know, frontside, their own turnout, you know...some men and strong boy they go in shorts, they got cook with them,...and the wild people,...they don't know, they haven't come in in this state yet...and all got tea, flour, and everything like that, sugar, tomahawks, you know belong cuttim wood, small axe...go through to the old people who round there, fetchim to come to know *gadia* [white man] Haly.³²

Most of Gale's 1913 Annual Report on Moola Bulla detailed the healthy financial position of the settlement and described various improvements and developments. The station was proving very profitable for the government and at the same time prison costs continued to be reduced. In the last paragraph Gale referred briefly to the Aboriginal population, noting that 'unemployed natives have recognised Moola Bulla as their home' and that preference in employment was being given 'to the younger generation with a view to teaching them different branches of work in connection with the handling of cattle and horses'.³³

The following year, 1914, saw a severe measles epidemic tragically proving fatal to numerous Aborigines on Moola Bulla and surrounding stations. As Haly put it: 'Judging from diminished numbers that have visited the settlement, I can only conclude the mortality was very heavy'.³⁴ In addition, the Kimberley was suffering from a drought which reduced the station's profitability. Yet, work developing the station continued steadily, and Gale was more than enthusiastic about the future prospects of the settlement:

I unhesitatingly say that the Government have a splendid asset in the Settlement for the future use of the Aborigines Department. Not only is it self-supporting at the present moment, but its future capabilities are great. Already it has been instrumental in saving the Government an annual

30 Ibid.

31 Ibid.

32 Transcript of oral history (Pincher Long) taken by Audrey Bolger at No.1 Reserve, Hall's Creek, 18 March 1982.

33 AR 1913.

34 AR 1914.

expenditure of over £10,000 incidental to the upkeep of native gaols...and with a bold development policy the Settlement will carry cattle in numbers to make it a big payable proposition. In view of the future refrigerating and meat works at Wyndham, a profit should eventually be made sufficient to materially reduce the Parliamentary vote yearly given to the Department.. From an aborigines' standpoint, the Settlement has been a continued success, and the result has exceeded my anticipations.³⁵

Late in 1914, Haly wrote to Gale informing him that two Hall's Creek constables had been charged with 'improperly using police equipment for cattle killing'. Haly protested strongly about the police killing cattle on Moola Bulla, pointing out that:

they are setting a bad example by indiscriminately killing in the bush... [T]his matter of killing by the police...is detrimental to the best interests of Moola Bulla...especially as the Resident Magistrate is of the opinion it is not necessary for the police to go out and kill as there is a local butcher.³⁶

Apart from the sheer hypocrisy of a situation in which police were committing the very crimes for which they were arresting Aborigines, another comment can be made in respect of this extraordinary case. The two police constables had pleaded that their offence was 'established custom'. The questions of 'established by whom?' and 'for how long?' remain unanswered and, while the scale of cattle killing by police may not have been extensive, it nevertheless remains that numbers of reported incidents of cattle killing by Aborigines in the area over the years could well have been exaggerated and Aborigines wrongly accused and convicted. The case was referred to the Commissioner of Police in Perth who, early in 1915, had the constables concerned removed from Hall's Creek.³⁷

In 1915, A.O. Neville replaced Gale as Chief Protector of Aborigines, a position he was to hold until his retirement in 1940. In the same year, Haly was obliged to take eight months' sick leave from his position as station manager at Moola Bulla. Neville and Underwood, the Minister of the Department of Aborigines, made a tour of the north of the State in 1916, visiting Moola Bulla in June of that year. They were impressed with developments at the station which, Neville wrote, 'was not only fulfilling the purpose for which it was established, but [was] also proving a financial success.'³⁸ But Neville cautioned:

The station should not, however, be classed as a trading concern, and I intend to recommend its exclusion accordingly. The object of such a station or settlement is primarily to rear a sufficient number of cattle with which to supply the natives with meat, and by so doing induce them to cease their depredations amongst cattle owned privately, and if it can do this, and also dispose of a sufficient number to make it a remunerative concern, so much the better. Its primary object, however, being the maintenance of the natives, it can in no way be classed with other State trading concerns.³⁹

Haly continued as manager of Moola Bulla until the end of 1918, when he was transferred to the Wyndham meatworks. Although archival evidence indicates that Haly, with a background in stock inspection, had energetically and competently overseen the

35 Ibid.

36 Moola Bulla native station file No. 2760/14.

37 Ibid.

38 AR 1916.

39 Ibid.

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establishment of the station, it is hardly surprising that the viability and profitability of the pastoral side of the settlement had engaged most of his time and attention. While not unmindful of the Aboriginal residents of Moola Bulla, Haly's reports suggest that they were a lower priority than improvements to the property, cattle and horses. In his final report (1918), Haly made a statement which is indicative of his attitude and practices:

Every effort is made to keep as many employed as possible, where it is found that their labour will in some way recompense for the cost of feeding and clothing them. In this way they are kept out of mischief.⁴⁰

The dependency of the northern pastoral industry on Aboriginal labour had been highlighted by the years of World War One, when many white workers had left to join the armed forces. Unlike Gale, Neville not only recognised the value of Aboriginal labour, but believed that pastoralists ought to pay minimum cash wages to their Aboriginal employees. Despite his efforts, Neville was never able to make this view prevail during his whole time in office.

At the end of World War One Moola Bulla took on the additional function of training returned soldiers in station work. In an arrangement with the Commonwealth Department of Repatriation, eight men were to be provided with six months' training, 'with a view to their ultimate settlement in Kimberley'.⁴¹ In 1920, Neville reported that the whole area of Moola Bulla station had, by Proclamation, been declared a reserve for Aborigines. While Neville stated that experience had shown that the reserve of 750 ha. around the homestead, which had been declared when Moola Bulla was first acquired, was 'not nearly large enough', it seems that his unstated concern was that lands not formally reserved for Aborigines would be made available for settlement by returned servicemen.⁴² The establishment of a chain of reserves in the far north, to which Aborigines could retreat in the face of expanding pastoral settlement, was part of his overall management plan.

At this time, G.C. Trenouth, a former head stockman, was acting manager of Moola Bulla until T. Woodland was appointed manager in March 1921. During the early 1920s, the station's profitability declined, partly because of changes in management and partly because of drought conditions. Yet in 1923, the station still paid some £8595 directly to Treasury. 1925 was apparently the worst season on record and the first time Moola Bulla reported a loss but, reported Neville, 'I found the natives contented and happy, and the indigents well cared for'.⁴³ Despite financial losses, Neville continued to report favourably on the station's success in fulfilling the purpose for which it was established:

[I]t was never intended to be a money making concern, but it has been our endeavour to make it pay its way, which up to this year it has succeeded in doing and has thus obviated the expenditure of the many thousands of pounds annually which were formerly required to defray the cost of the prevention of cattle killing by natives.⁴⁴

Under Neville, Moola Bulla and similar northern settlements began to acquire a different role in the management and control of the Aboriginal population. The system of stations was to be, in Neville's own words, one of:

40 AR 1918.

41 AR 1919.

42 Biskup 1973:103-4.

43 AR 1925.

44 Ibid.

providing future homes for the Aboriginal population in the far north ... Undoubtedly as this country becomes settled it will be necessary for aborigines within it to repair to these reserves, and the time is not too far distant when these settlements...will remain the only permanent homes and hunting grounds of the erstwhile possessors of the land.

At any time if it should be deemed expedient or desirable to establish complete segregation, it can be accomplished with the least difficulty on these areas. At present, beyond excluding the white man and affording sanctuary and sustenance for the natives, complete segregation is not aimed at.⁴⁵

By the late 1920s, Moola Bulla's success as a cattle station was creating some of the problems which Neville had anticipated. Neville reported:

Owing to its success as a cattle and stud station, the real and original purpose of its establishment is liable to be overlooked and there are already those who begin to talk of cutting up the property and disposing of it for closer settlement... t would be a sorry day for the natives in East Kimberley if this institution was ever abandoned as a native station, and it should always remain to supply permanent sanctuary for these people so long as any number of them are left, even in the days of closer settlement, which may eventually come about.⁴⁶

During the 1920s, the number of Aboriginal people in the main camp at Moola Bulla was reported as varying between 140 and 170. In 1928, Woodland, the manager, reported that an average of 55 Aboriginal people were employed doing station work and repairs to roads. For an Aboriginal person at Moola Bulla to be classified as 'employed' still meant working for no monetary reward. Any payment received continued to be in the form of food and clothing.

August 1929 saw the commencement of a school for 'native and half caste' children, with Mrs Tuohy, the storekeeper's wife, as the teacher. The children were reported to be very keen and in the first four months of the school's operation, numbers in attendance increased from 24 to 35. By 1931, according to archival evidence, the Moola Bulla school had become 'quite a popular institution', with children reportedly being 'sent in from far and wide' and 'making excellent progress under Mrs Tuohy'.⁴⁷ The school's reported popularity continued into the early 1930s, leading to the suggestion of the need for a dormitory for Aboriginal children being sent in by pastoralists.

In 1932 Neville reported that 60 Aboriginal people were employed for stock and station work, road building and maintenance, wagon and pumping work. 'The work done by the natives is a credit to them', wrote the Chief Protector.⁴⁸ By the mid-1930s, over two hundred Aboriginal men, women and children lived in the main camp at Moola Bulla. In addition to satisfactory results in the cattle sector, good results were also being reported with sheep and other stock. Woodland noted in 1935 that:

Seventy natives were employed doing stock, tanning, road and general work during the year... The tannery is being carried on by natives under the

45 AR 1926.

46 AR 1928.

47 AR 1931.

48 AR 1932.

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supervision of the bookkeeper and manager. The natives take an interest in the work. Leather to the value of £58 was sold during the year.⁴⁹

In this year, Neville commended the 'efficient management' of the station to his Minister, but urged that additional buildings be provided to accommodate school children and a clinic. The number of children in the Moola Bulla school had by this time reached 48.

During the latter half of the 1930s, Neville's reports continued to show the importance of Moola Bulla as a profitable cattle station run by his department. On average, some sixty Aboriginal people were employed at tannery and general work on the station and, as Woodland described the Aboriginal employees in the tannery, 'The natives do good work'.⁵⁰ At this time, Woodland's reports indicate that Moola Bulla was taking on additional functions. By 1937, a clinic had been established at Moola Bulla and the nurse immediately began to treat a range of minor ailments and sores while taking charge of 'all half-blood girls'. Moola Bulla also began to function overtly as a detention centre. Woodland reported in 1936 that:

Two natives were transferred for detention at the Station, one being sent from Broome and one from Forrest River.⁵¹

A graphic account by Alfie Gerrard, an Aboriginal man who was taken from Wyndham to Moola Bulla as a boy, refers to some young men being sent to the station in 1938 from Forrest River Mission.⁵² The missionary priest arranged for these five young men to be sent to Moola Bulla because, according to Gerrard:

[T]hey used to go out and play around with the single women, their girlfriends. They got caught and for punishment were sent to Moola Bulla for hard labour.⁵³

Gerrard later described an incident involving these men, which occurred while the manager and the teachers were away on holiday. Two white stock-men, left in charge of the settlement, were jealous of the sexual relations between these men and some 'beautiful half-caste girls' and according to Gerrard, chained them by their necks to a tree for a week in the sun, with a four-gallon drum for a toilet and a slice of bread a day. As additional punishment, the stockmen forced them to submit to electric shocks, flogging and a further week of being locked up in a small room. One of the Aborigines had his testicles cut by one of the white stockman. At about the same time, an Aboriginal police tracker was shot and killed by the other stockman. The five Aboriginal men eventually got away from Moola Bulla and returned to Forrest River Mission. In Gerrard's view, the fact that nothing was done about the complaints, which the Aborigines registered with the police, resulted from the 'thick discrimination' which was prevalent at that time, allowing white people 'to do anything' to an Aboriginal person.⁵⁴

Increasing numbers of children at Moola Bulla made accommodation problems acute during the late 1930s. Annual reports from Neville and Woodland at this time also began to distinguish between 'full-bloods' and 'half-bloods'. For example, in 1938, Woodland reported that out of an average number of 189 Aboriginal people at Moola Bulla, there were 'forty-eight other than full-bloods', of whom 12 were working. In detailing what seemed

49 AR 1935.

50 AR 1936.

51 Ibid.

52 Gammage and Spearritt 1987:55-63.

53 Ibid:61.

54 Cf. Gammage and Spearritt, 1987.

like relatively extensive improvements to beef houses, garages, troughing and windmill installations, Woodland also noted that 'a shade for the half-blood girls has been built'.⁵⁵ In the same year, Neville wrote:

Moola Bulla Native Station is fast assuming an institutional character due to the compulsory accommodation there of increasing numbers of half-caste children...there must soon be a hundred children there.⁵⁶

Again, and on the basis of such projections, Neville urged the necessity of additional buildings. The impression given by Neville that Moola Bulla was becoming an institution of its own accord suggests that policy was not determining practice. Yet departmental policy was inevitably shaping the institutional character of Moola Bulla, as was apparent in the very next paragraph of Neville's 1938 Annual Report:

The Department has long recognised that the moral and spiritual training of youngsters should go hand in hand with secular training... Long ago a promise was given to the Presbyterian Church authorities that should we ever establish a missionary at Moola Bulla, that Church should receive the first opportunity of supplying one.⁵⁷

Accordingly, an agreement was reached between Neville's department and the Board of Missions of the Presbyterian Church of Australia that a minister and his wife would be stationed at Moola Bulla to take charge of the spiritual side of the settlement and run the school. So in 1939 Moola Bulla acquired the further role of a mission, with the arrival of the Reverend. and Mrs Hovenden. The missionaries reopened the school, which had been closed for twelve months and instituted regular weekly church services.

Alfie Gerrard's recollections, referred to earlier, confirm these developments and add further details about institutional practices at Moola Bulla. Alfie and his brother Dick were taken to the settlement from Wyndham in 1937. He recalled:

They picked up all the half-caste kids from all over the east Kimberley area and the west Kimberley and put them all in that settlement... They were picked up from all the cattle stations around this area, and even the towns, any half-caste kids. They didn't care much for the full blood, only for the halfbreed. Anyone that had a bit of colour was put in there .

And we had to be Christianed. All new boys that came in were flogged on the Saturday morning. Dick my brother and I, we got the biggest bloody hiding that morning. I don't know why. Don't ask me why it happened, what it was all about, but they had to Christian the boys by giving them a good flogging.⁵⁸

Gerrard described the good times they had with the 'old fellers' and in the stock camps. New sorts of relationships developed among Aboriginal people in the institutional setting. Foster parents 'claimed' particular children and took a special interest in them. Peer groups took on additional significance to children who had been removed to Moola Bulla and separated from their families. During the wet season, Aboriginal people would come to the

55 AR 1938.

56 Ibid.

57 Ibid.

58 Gammage and Spearritt 1987: 55-56.

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station from all over the area.⁵⁹ There would be sport days and holiday corroborees, the holding of traditional ceremonies, older people taught the children to throw boomerangs and spears, to fish, to hunt and to gather bush tucker. Memories of happy times at Moola Bulla, which were associated by most Aboriginal people with freedom from institutional constraints, contrasted with the harsh discipline and punishment and the meagre payments which Aboriginal workers received.

The beginning of World War Two heralded a number of significant changes, both short and long term, for Moola Bulla and its residents. 1940 saw the retirements of both Neville as Commissioner of Native Affairs and Woodland as the manager of Moola Bulla. The new manager of the station was A. George. During his first year at Moola Bulla, dormitories were erected for boys and girls. School and church activities continued under the direction of the missionary and his wife, and profits of nearly £7000 went from Moola Bulla to the state treasury.

War conditions were to create great demand for Aboriginal labour. Bray, Neville's successor, acknowledged in his 1942 report the large part which Aboriginal labour was playing in maintaining the state's rural and pastoral industries. He also noted:

Perhaps our policy for educating and training of the natives for rural and pastoral occupations may reveal its wisdom. The training facilities for this policy are limited...more settlements are required. The untrained pool of native labour is still large. It should be taken in hand more vigorously and trained to the establishment of a rural peasantry...there is no reason why there should not be an even greater reliance on native labour after the war ...

[I]f able-bodied natives [were] not working, [they were] ordered to work and if they failed to obtain it they were removed to the settlements for disciplinary correction... After periods of disciplinary treatment in settlements the previously indifferent natives offered for outside employment.⁶⁰

Although the war years under George's management saw a growth in the size of the cattle herd, as well as an increase in the numbers of Aborigines employed, whether willingly or not, at Moola Bulla (95 people in 1945) Bray reported in 1945 that there was a great need for institutional activities, which were almost lacking at that time. The school had closed down in 1943 and many of the 'half-caste' children were sent to school at the Beagle Bay mission. Plans were being proposed to develop the station into a 'modern Native Institution', which seems to have meant constructing extra buildings for the 'welfare of natives'.⁶¹

The immediate post-war years witnessed an unprecedented focus of public attention in Western Australia on matters relating to Aboriginal labour in the north of the state. Aboriginal stockmen in the Pilbara went on strike in 1946, their actions assisted by a sympathetic local white man, Don McLeod. Events in the Pilbara had repercussions for Aboriginal station workers in the Kimberley, who were reported as 'showing signs of unrest'⁶² and an increasing awareness of their value to the pastoral industry. At the time of Bray's retirement in 1947, the lack of suitable staff was being cited as the main reason for the 'unbalancing effect upon the general effectiveness of the Department's welfare efforts at

⁵⁹ Similar accounts of the 'good times' at Moola Bulla are to be found in the transcripts of numerous oral histories held by the Kimberley Language Resource Centre, Hall's Creek, W.A.

⁶⁰ AR 1942.

⁶¹ AR 1945.

⁶² Biskup 1973:236.

Departmental institutions'. Shortly after Bray's retirement, the state government decided to appoint a magistrate, Bateman, to undertake an inquiry into the 'Aboriginal problem' and to make appropriate recommendations. As far as Moola Bulla was concerned, apart from the fact that it was self-supporting, Bateman reported critically and at length on the Department's management of the station:

To refer to Moola Bulla as a native institution in its present run-down state would be palpably absurd. Beyond the fact that dormitories are provided for a number of children, there is nothing to distinguish this station from any other station in the North.

The main objective in the establishment of Moola Bulla in the first instance was to reduce cattle killing by the natives but it may be assumed that another objective was the advancement and development of the Kimberley natives and there was every reason to anticipate beneficial results in this direction. Unfortunately however it has not been developed in the manner designed and in recent years it has suffered a regrettable decline. The failure of Moola Bulla to progress according to plan undoubtedly is due chiefly to the war and its aftermath but there appears to have been a certain amount of lassitude on the part of the Department also...it is surprising that some attempt has not been made during the last two years to effect some improvements.

The lack of institutional buildings is as extraordinary as it is regrettable, not even a school-room or a dining-room existing... If one excepts the verandahs of the girls' dormitories, no accommodation is provided for the working natives. The Department has circularised all stations in the North requesting them to provide better housing for their working natives. While this action may be commendable in itself, it is a strange request coming from an authority which has made no effort itself to provide housing for many of its own native inmates.

I believe there is a good future ahead of this institution, but it should be developed along institutional lines and not merely as a cattle station.⁶³

In 1948, Middleton was appointed to replace Bray and he brought with him more of a commitment to 'native welfare', which was to signify a change of emphasis at settlements such as Moola Bulla. In his first Annual Report for 1949, Middleton wrote:

The institutional side of Moola Bulla in the past has been subordinated to the primary business of cattle and horse pursuits, but the ensuing year will, I am confident, see tremendous changes.⁶⁴

In Middleton's first year as Commissioner, George was convicted of an offence under the Brands Act and dismissed as manager of Moola Bulla. This was fortuitous as far as Middleton's plans were concerned, because the change of managership allowed him to replace George with a Manager-Superintendent in the person of C.L. McBeath, a former policeman, travelling inspector and Acting Commissioner of Native Affairs. Middleton wrote that McBeath's appointment:

has immeasurably strengthened the position of the Department which now has an efficient manager, as well as a sincere altruist, to handle the new policies to be introduced at Moola Bulla. The native inmates were delighted with the move, as the transfer has given them a sympathetic and understanding leader...

⁶³ Bateman Report 1948:11.

⁶⁴ AR 1949.

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Plans are now in hand for the creation of Moola Bulla to be the show place of the North, and in the hands of the present manager, there is every indication that these plans will soon materialise.⁶⁵

Middleton's optimistic expectations for Moola Bulla seemed to be realised. Early reports from McBeath reversed the emphasis given to stock and station matters by previous managers in their reports. His first Annual Report in 1950 dealt extensively with Aboriginal education, welfare and health matters at the station. He had initially made an exhaustive inquiry into complaints of maladministration by the former manager and found all institutional aspects chaotic and most of the inmates depressed and sullen.⁶⁶ Noting that education ranked high in the field of native administration, McBeath reported that the station school had reopened in 1950 with Mr and Mrs Gill as teachers and a total of 53 children in senior and advanced kindergarten sections. The newly appointed teachers had also commenced voluntary night classes for adults, quite a few of whom, wrote McBeath, showed 'a pathetic eagerness to learn to read and write'.⁶⁷

The new Manager-Superintendent also provided details of the employment situation at the station. His report indicate that Aboriginal workers at Moola Bulla began to receive cash wages almost a year before most Kimberley pastoralists started paying money to their Aboriginal employees:

Of the total of 34 adult castes 22 are males and 12 females. All males are employed, 10 being in receipt of wages ranging from £1 to £6 per week. Duties include mechanics, handymen, yard-builders, fencers, stockmen and butchers. Two caste girls are paid wages at the rate of 10 shillings weekly. A special rate of wages has already been approved for this station but can only be implemented with caution and discretion as the majority of stations in the East and North Kimberleys as yet have not placed their workers on a wages basis...

The caste people here are mainly good types... The station proper caste population are both industrious and well behaved. The male full-blood workers are engaged mostly as stockmen, and all have worked exceptionally well. No day has been too long or too hard.

The older people attend to the general work about the station such as woodcutting, sanitary removals, gardening, hygiene squad, labouring and domestic work.

It would seem that all the inmates are appreciative of the improved conditions which I implemented after taking over, and that they have expressed this feeling in their readiness to perform the tasks allotted to them to the best of their ability.⁶⁸

At the same time that McBeath reported on his first year as Manager-Superintendent of Moola Bulla, the District Officer for East Kimberley, J. Rhatigan, forwarded his comments, advice and recommendations on matters relating to Aboriginal labour in the region.⁶⁹ He was concerned with what he considered a potential 'half-caste' problem in the East Kimberley. With reference to Aboriginal women, Rhatigan pointed out that:

65 Ibid.

66 AR 1950.

67 Ibid.

68 Ibid.

69 Ibid.

full-blood domestic labour is cheaper than the half-caste, and therefore the station people will be reluctant to employ half-caste female labour whilst the full-blood labour is available.⁷⁰

In addition, Rhatigan anticipated future problems among 'coloured' males who, in his opinion, would not be prepared to continue working on stations for low wages. In order to meet the increasing demand for skilled labour in the region and to improve the wages and living conditions of 'coloured' workers, Rhatigan advocated the urgent establishment of a manual training school at Moola Bulla:

These people and their progeny are the potential labour of the North...and will be the mainstay of labour under the trying conditions of the tropics. It only remains for us to place the facilities at their disposal whereby they can, and will, become competent tradesmen.

[T]he half-caste population is increasing. The demand for skilled labour is also increasing...

[A]t Moola Bulla...we already have the foundations on which to work ... the provision of facilities with which to train coloured children as engineers, mechanics, carpenters, saddlers, etc., would make Moola Bulla the show place of the West and, in addition to meeting the station's own labour problems, would benefit the whole pastoral industry.⁷¹

As far as 'full-blood' Aboriginal male workers were concerned, Rhatigan was of the opinion that little needed be done for them, apart from a general improvement in their living conditions, because they were 'perfectly happy and contented' as stockmen on stations, 'which would experience great difficulty in functioning without their labour...'⁷²

An issue which had been raised in the late 1930s and which was again a subject of discussion between the manager of Moola Bulla and the department during the mid to late 1940s, continued to be a cause for administrative concern in the 1950s. This was the issue of managing 'half-caste' and 'full-blood' Aboriginal people at the same institution. This issue was clearly apparent in McBeath's first report. Bray had earlier written to George in 1944 that the provision of full institutional facilities at Moola Bulla should be restricted to 'full-bloods' and that 'native children with white blood in their veins' ought to be sent to a new and separate institution proposed for the West Kimberley, where he considered they could be more easily administered away from the 'detrimental' influence of 'full-bloods'.⁷³ A similar argument was made by McBeath in 1950:

I might mention that educational aspects will never be completely successful at this station until it is possible to transfer the camp children to special institutional accommodation and thus remove them from the camp influence of the adult full-bloods, parents and otherwise. This same influence, although often arising from the love of the parents, and others, for the child, is completely undesirable from our standards and can only delay the progress of the child to such an extent that it becomes retrogression. Nomadic habits and tendencies must be eliminated if the child is to be given a sense of

70 Ibid.

71 Ibid.

72 Ibid.

73 Moola Bulla native station file No. 993/332/28

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responsibility sufficient to take its place in the community both economically and in other respects.⁷⁴

McBeath also referred in his first report to staffing, by which he meant both the unsuitability of some staff and the impossibility of securing the services of a competent head stockman, with the result that he was compelled to take on a considerable amount of additional responsibility. Missionary activities at the station had ceased during the war. A visitor from the United Aborigines Mission had conducted religious services at Moola Bulla in July 1949 and McBeath considered that the station badly needed the services of what he called a 'Missionary-Welfare Worker'.

By 1951, over 230 Aboriginal people lived at Moola Bulla. Cottage accommodation for 'half-caste families' was well under way and ablution blocks were being constructed. A spinifex shed was constructed for junior school classes and Aboriginal employees had been engaged in re-timbering and stockyard construction. Middleton reported that:

The natives in the area are encouraged by the educational facilities offered to their children and an improved approach to their welfare. Perhaps their response to these improvements can be gauged by the fact that no police action at the station was necessitated during the year. It is a credit to them that such a large concentration of people can be so law abiding.⁷⁵

Improvements to the station continued during 1952, with educational activities being given the highest priority by McBeath. The number of children in the school had increased to 73. Sewing classes provided for the older girls by a young Aboriginal woman of mixed descent were proving popular and successful and plans for some form of technical education for the boys were being developed. McBeath had introduced organised recreational activities at the station, including basketball, cricket, darts and weekly sound pictures. He reported: 'All these sports and functions are greatly enjoyed by the people here.'⁷⁶ As far as employment was concerned, McBeath's remarks reflect not only the continuing significance of Aboriginal labour on the station, but also prevailing attitudes about the way in which work value and remuneration were measured according to skin colour and the extent of the mixture of 'black' and 'white' blood:

All 19 adult male castes are employed in the various sections of the institution, or Station side as stockmen, mechanics, carpenters, yard builders, fencers or trainees the rate of remuneration being according to ability and aptitude, and all are very satisfactory in their particular branch of employment ...prior to my taking over, the caste person was treated in a similar manner to the bush type of native.

As in the past the male full bloods are mostly engaged on stock work, the balance performing such duties as pumping, gardening, fencing, yard-building, general labouring, hygiene, etc., and the younger ones as trainees in the various sections... I have endeavoured to place both caste and full-blood youths in employment for which they appear best-suited, and not allocated according to rule of thumb methods... The old view of stock work for boys, and domestic service for the girls without any exception has been well and

74 AR 1950.

75 AR 1951.

76 AR 1952.

truly exploded... the native can be very capable if only given the opportunity and training when young enough to absorb instruction.⁷⁷

McBeath noted that a general wages scale had been implemented at Moola Bulla at rates ranging from ten shillings per week for trainees to award wages. He ensured that all wages were paid in cash or by cheque, deploring the practice generally followed on other stations at that time of extending credit to Aboriginal employees through the station store.

Drought was experienced in the Kimberley in the early 1950s and efforts were made at Moola Bulla to improve the water supply. By 1953, over 260 Aboriginal people lived at the station. Given the optimism expressed in published reports, various schemes being proposed and the improvements being effected at this time, Middleton's recommendation in 1954 to close Moola Bulla comes as nothing short of surprising. The official reasons which the Commissioner gave for his recommendation were as follows:

It has long been felt desirable that this Department should be relieved of the responsibility for the administration and management of pastoral and agricultural properties, mainly because it was found that such responsibilities have seriously hampered and curtailed the functions and duties of the department's welfare officers stationed on these properties.⁷⁸

Accordingly, Middleton stated, six such establishments had been disposed of over the previous five years. As far as Moola Bulla was concerned, the Commissioner noted that:

this 1,100,000 acre cattle station has been an administrative bug-bear for some considerable time...the management of such a huge property...has imposed on the welfare and clerical staff of the department a crushing and disproportionate burden of work and responsibility. The long drought condition...over the past two or three years...made the situation quite unbearable and a strong recommendation was made to the Hon. Minister for Native Welfare urging that the department be relieved of the responsibility of the cattle station and that the institutional section of the settlement be transferred to a new site adjacent to the new Hall's Creek township.⁷⁹

Middleton anticipated that all employable Aboriginal people from Moola Bulla would find work on stations locally and that his department would then only have institutional responsibility for indigent adults and children. Cabinet agreed to set up a committee to report on Middleton's recommendation which, at its first meeting, agreed on five specific points. These points are noteworthy on a number of counts, not the least of which are the virtual absence of reference to the Aboriginal occupants and the mention of the issue of oil and mineral exploration as a factor involved in the decision to close Moola Bulla:

1. That Moola Bulla as a native cattle station and welfare institution should be closed.
2. That the Native Reserve be cancelled and the land handed back to the Lands Department, less such portion of it as may be required by the Native Affairs Department.
3. That the Lands Department appraise the property and stock and have the land sub-divided into areas suitable for re-selection under pastoral lease, subject to payment for improvements and excision of an area not exceeding 10,000 acres for Native Affairs purposes.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ AR 1954.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

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4. During the transitional period the Lands Department to manage property and dispose of stock in collaboration with the Native Affairs Department.

5. If the foregoing recommendations are adopted, the work of the Mines Department in regard to oil and mineral research will be considerably simplified.⁸⁰

The speed with which the decision to dispose of Moola Bulla was reached was in marked contrast both to the way in which policy had been implemented in earlier years at Moola Bulla and to the way in which proposals to transfer the institutional section of the settlement were to proceed.

In two sections of his 1955 annual report headed 'Moola Bulla and the Kimberleys' and 'Natives and Publicity', Middleton attempted to answer criticism being levelled at his department through the press from a variety of organisations and individuals. This report is remarkable in its expressions of contempt for what Middleton variously called 'destructive whites'; 'uninformed, vexatious busy-bodies'; 'enemies of the State'; 'parasites' and 'social non-descripts'. He dismissed the criticism as the work of 'communist stirrers' (among whom he singled out Don McLeod) and proceeded to justify the decision to dispose of Moola Bulla on the grounds that it was, among other things, in the best interests of the Aborigines. He maintained that the station had outlived its usefulness and 'was no better fitted to train young natives to stock work than any other Kimberley station'.⁸¹

Despite previous agreements that the welfare needs of Aboriginal people from Moola Bulla would be adequately safeguarded and despite the assurances of Mr and Mrs Goldman, the successful tenderers for the property, that everyone working and residing on the property would be kept on, and maintained,⁸² the fact was that when the Goldmans took possession of Moola Bulla in July 1955, the Aboriginal population was evicted. Middleton's Annual Report for 1956 refers to the influx of 'Moola Bulla evacuees' to the United Aborigines' Mission in Fizroy Crossing (see map) and quotes the words of a missionary who, he said, was given less than twenty-four hours' notice of their arrival:

Early in July approximately one hundred and fifty-seven people arrived from the Moola Bulla Government settlement. The increase was overwhelming at first, but all measured up to the extra work and responsibility and so the job of settling in was accomplished. Tents were flown in by Native Welfare and extra food stuffs arrived within a few days, thus temporary accommodation and dining facilities were arranged.

Many were the telegrams received from the managers of cattle and sheep stations throughout the Kimberleys, seeking employees. We arranged for workers to go to stations between Derby and Hall's Creek and further. The demand was so great that not all the stations could be supplied with labour.⁸³

The whole incident received wide media coverage and was the focus of debate in state parliament. The Department of Native Welfare was criticised for mishandling the situation and a number of groups and individuals protested against what had happened. For example, the Victorian Branch of the Council for Aboriginal Rights wrote to the department as follows:

80 Ibid.

81 Ibid.

82 AR 1955.

83 AR 1956.

[You have] been guilty of a great breach of trust as far as the Aborigines are concerned. The property should never have been sold at all, but having determined that you would do so, it is unbelievable that no business-like arrangements were made with the new owners regarding the large numbers of Aborigines living there. As it is just not possible that any government department conduct its affairs in such an inefficient manner, there is apparently some more sinister reason for this neglect. We wish to protest most forcefully against your inexcusable behaviour in this matter and request that you take immediate steps to provide decent facilities for these people in their own district.⁸⁴

In a letter dated 18 June 1955, the Labor Women's Organisation (Perth) wrote to the Commissioner of Native Welfare asking:

what benefits the natives who have improved the reserve by their labour have received, or will receive, from the benefits of the sale?⁸⁵

Debate concerning the sale of Moola Bulla continued intermittently for several years, the issue occasionally providing politicians with material to criticise their opposition. Many of the questions asked at the time remain unanswered. It is difficult to see in what ways the view of the station as being 'for the benefit of the Aborigines', which was expressed at the time of its establishment, reiterated at intervals over the years and again at the time of its eventual sale, was ever, or could ever, have been realised. Aboriginal people who lived at Moola Bulla over the years had very little choice in the circumstances. For many people of the Kija language group, it was their traditional country. Other people were forcibly removed or detained there. Many were born on the station, while others died and were buried there. The experiences of Aboriginal people at Moola Bulla station reflect the authoritarian, institutional regime to which they were subject, yet also show that people retain some positive memories of life at the settlement. Aboriginal people adapted to changing administrative and managerial requirements, developing strategies aimed at either accommodating to, or resisting, such requirements by drawing on aspects of their own cultural traditions and social organisation.

Aboriginal people contributed to the viability and profitability of the station, as they had done elsewhere in the pastoral industry,⁸⁶ and to that extent they certainly 'worked' Moola Bulla. But they were never consulted about policy decisions which directly affected them, nor did they benefit from improvements to, or the sale of, the property. The following comments typify Aboriginal sentiments about Moola Bulla:

Oh, real good place Moola Bulla was before, sorry we lost that place. Don't know why they sold that place. Break Aboriginal heart, yeh, Moola Bulla got everything because the white man grow that place up, you know, cattle and everything like that... Aborigines done most job in that place, not white people. Aboriginal done a lot of yard building, fence, they done everything in that station, not most the white people. Yes, we bin sorry we left that place. Don't know why welfare mob sold that place... We like to get Moola Bulla

84 Moola Bulla native station file 993.3/53.

85 Ibid.

86 Berndt and Berndt 1987.

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back...that what we thinking about... Moola Bulla better country than this one. Good place, plenty bush tucker as well.⁸⁷

Examining archival materials and taking account of Aboriginal reminiscences makes it difficult to refute the conclusion that Aboriginal people did not receive any special benefit from policies developed and practices employed at Moola Bulla. The real beneficiaries, both short and long term, of Moola Bulla's existence as a 'native cattle station' which was worked by Aboriginal people, were the Kimberley pastoral industry and the state government treasury.

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⁸⁷ Transcript of oral history (Colin Barrett) taken by Audrey Bolger at No.1 Reserve, Hall's Creek, 17 March 1982.