JOURNAL OF THE
ANTHROPOLOGICAL SOCIETY
OF
SOUTH AUSTRALIA

VOLUME 31
NUMBERS 1 & 2
December 1993

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ISSN 1034-4438
‘Running down’ Aboriginal women in colonial South Australia

Justine Ball

In Peter Carey’s novel, *Oscar & Lucinda*, set in the mid-19th century in New South Wales, there is a scene inside a tavern in a town called Bellingen Heads.¹ The inside of the bar is uninviting - smelly and filled with flies - the men occupying the bar are unshaven, coarse and unfriendly. At one end of the bar there is a curtain:

A couple seemed to be having sexual congress on the other side of the torn curtain through which men - short, for the most part, broad and shovel-bearded, none of them too steady on their feet - would occasionally come and go.²

A little later in the narrative we discover that the woman behind the torn curtain was an Aboriginal woman who had been abducted by cedar cutters some twelve months previously and who was ‘as reduced and miserable as any human being might ever be’.³ Thus, the reader’s whole perception of the previously anonymous woman behind the curtain has changed and we realise that the ‘couple’ behind the torn curtain were in actual fact a perpetrator and a victim of kidnap, rape and absolute cruelty. Although *Oscar & Lucinda* is a fictional historical account, it does illustrate that in these times there were always two sides to the stories told by the early settlers. It was often the case that the stories of Aboriginal women’s experiences of European occupation, in particular, were never told. Instead, many assumptions were made about the moral integrity (or lack of it) of Aboriginal women and very little attention was paid to discovering the particular experiences of Aboriginal women and their emotional reactions to these experiences.

In this paper, I will discuss several issues which arose out of my reading of accounts by, generally, white men about Aboriginal women. In this way I
hope to throw a different light on the picture drawn by the early settlers in South Australia of Aboriginal women.

An issue that drew some attention in the newspapers, particularly during the parliamentary debates over the Aborigines Bill in 1899, was the ‘running down’ and abduction of Aboriginal women by white station workers in remote areas for the purpose of sexual intercourse. In a report in the Advertiser of 2 December 1899 concerning the Aborigines Bill, a Mr C Thorpe stationed at Camooweal is quoted as follows:

I feel sure that if half the young lubras now being detained (I won’t call it kept, for I know most of them would clear away if they could), were approached on the subject, they would say that they were run down by station blackguards on horseback and taken to the stations for licentious purposes, and there kept more like slaves than anything else. I have heard it said that these same lubras have been locked up for weeks at a time... whilst their heartless persecutors have been mustering cattle on their respective runs. Some, I have heard, take those lubras with them, but take the precaution to tie them up securely for the night to prevent them escaping.\

It was clear that many Aboriginal women were being held in this manner: There are some stations on which nearly every man employed has his lubra, mostly obtained [by running them down], and against the will of her relatives as a rule they accompany the men whilst out on the run. In some instances lubras are also detained at stations without the consent of their husbands or relatives.\

and

It is the rule and not the exception for lubras to be used for the purpose specified [immoral purposes], as the number of half-caste children in the country will indicate.\

It appears from this sample of news articles on the subject that there was some considerable concern shown for the Aboriginal women who were being abducted in this cruel way. However, I suggest that there were three major
factors motivating the lively discussion on this topic and these factors had little to do with concern for the women. First, it was a popular suggestion that the cause of many attacks on white station workers and overlanders (generally male) was the treatment by those white men of the Aboriginal women:

Most of the crimes committed by the blacks had been caused by breaches of native laws by white people, and by the taking of lubras by the whites.\(^7\)

Moorhouse, the Protector of Aborigines in the early days of settlement in South Australia, made similar observations in his letters to the Governor of South Australia concerning his various expeditions in the South East.\(^8\) In relating a conversation he had had with a Sydney Aborigine who had travelled the ‘overland track’ twice Moorhouse states:

He [the Aborigine] said the blacks were becoming enraged with the whites, for the latter had used the women of the former, and much abused them. The abuse, he explained, consisted in the Europeans promising the aborigines food, clothing and tomahawks for the use of their females; but the Europeans did not fulfil their promises. After gratifying their passions, the women were turned out late in the evening, or in the night, and instead of the men having their promised reward, they were laughed at or ridiculed.\(^9\)

Later in the same letter Moorhouse expresses his concern that the intimacy between the whites and the Aboriginal women encouraged the Aboriginal men to ask for items in return from the Europeans. Thus,

[w]hen he received food or clothing he was acquiring a taste for food that could not be obtained in his savage state, and there can be no wonder that when he sees it in the possession of others he should take it by force, unless there should be sufficient strength to resist.\(^10\)

In an earlier letter,\(^11\) Moorhouse describes an incident whereby one of his party - a shepherd - requested to have intercourse with the wife of an Adelaide Aboriginal who was accompanying the expedition. Moorhouse told the shepherd that this was not acceptable behaviour and would not be allowed. However, in defiance of Moorhouse’s wishes, the shepherd ‘had taken the woman out of her hut, much against her will, and effected his purpose.
Another shepherd, immediately after that, had intercourse with her by her own fire. Later in the expedition, Aboriginal women were ‘bargained for’ by several shepherds and Moorhouse witnessed three shepherds ‘having intercourse with the young females in the presence of several other Europeans’. He notes:

These breaches of moral rectitude on the part of the Europeans have, I fear, been the source of so many disasters to the overland parties.

It can be seen that Moorhouse’s main concern did not appear to be the women themselves, but the friction being caused between black men and white men. As quoted above, Moorhouse actually describes the ‘abuse’ as consisting of cruel behaviour towards the Aboriginal men - the failure by the whites to provide them with promised items and their loss of dignity in the face of ridicule by white men.

The second concern arising from sexual contact between European men and Aboriginal women was, I suggest, the increasing numbers of part-Aboriginal children that were being born. These children were being born at a time when the white population was probably convinced that the Aborigines were a ‘dying race’ and were not going to remain a ‘problem’ for much longer. It is clear from the Protector’s Reports for the years 1867-1878 that pressure was being put on government resources to provide for the Aboriginal population that was becoming increasingly dependent on handouts. Thus, the birth of part-Aboriginal children who were not being supported by their white fathers could well have been a major financial concern for the government of the day.

It was noted by Taplin that:

The pure blacks are not so healthy as the half-castes. Always the children of two half-castes will be healthier and stronger than either the children of blacks, or the children of a black and a half-castes [sic]. When a half-caste man and woman marry, they generally have a large and vigorous family: I could point to half-a-dozen such.
It could be argued then that the birth of part-Aboriginal children signified a possible re-growth of the Aboriginal population which may have been unfortunate news for those who merely wished to ‘smooth the dying pillow’ of the Aborigines. Indeed, the number of part-Aboriginal children being born by the time of the 1860 Select Committee appeared to be very high:

1651. Are the half-caste children numerous? - Very numerous - four out of five that have been born are half-caste.

... 

1655. Is there any possibility of tracing the parents of these children in many cases? - No, I think not.
1656. At Point Macleay, where there are many half caste children, the difficulty would not be very great, I should imagine, to convict many Europeans there? - The difficulty would be to get the women to state who they were.  

It is clear from this extract that some consideration was given to prosecuting white men who were having sexual intercourse with Aboriginal women, presumably in an attempt to curb the growing population of part-Aboriginal children and not, I suggest, to protect the Aboriginal women themselves from the exploitative habits of European men.

Part-Aboriginal children and their Aboriginal mothers were more often than not abandoned by the white fathers. An article in the Advertiser describes the practice of ‘comboism’ in the north-west of Queensland, which was the ‘maintenance of black women on stations by white men’. It is stated by the interviewee, Alexander Gordon, that once the woman gave birth to a part-Aboriginal child, ‘she is sent away to the camp, and a fresh gin obtained by the white man’. Presumably, the story would not have differed very greatly in South Australia and there is certainly very much discussion about the fact that the part-Aboriginal children were not generally claimed by their fathers. In his evidence before the 1860 Select Committee, Rev. Dean Farrell observed:

It may be done with a greater degree of ease, training the half-caste than the pure native. The father would not have the same claim, and probably would exercise none, or wish to exercise it. I think the feeling was, fifteen or eighteen years ago, that it would be cheaper
and more easy to deal with them, as they would not be reclaimed, or could not be reclaimed... 18

Dr. William Wyatt, before the committee, expressed much the same opinion:
I do not fancy that there would be any great difficulty [getting half-caste children away from their Aboriginal mothers], as in all probability the men, in such a case, would have no great desire to keep the child... 19

As a consequence of abandonment by the white fathers, the children were being raised by the Aboriginal community. This would have been an additional cause for concern amongst those missionaries and protectors who had been trying so hard to separate all Aboriginal children from their parents and the influences of traditional Aboriginal life:
I occasionally notice a good many half-caste children knocking about, not only in this, but also in the adjoining districts. Now, as these children rarely grow to man or womanhood when left with the tribes, it seems to me a pity that the police should not be instructed to have them removed to the Port Lincoln Institution at Poonindie, where they would be properly taken care of, and grow up, in many cases to be useful members of society. 20

A law to facilitate the adoption of half-caste and quadroon children by benevolent white people would do much good. I mean a law which would render valid the conveyance of the child to the persons adopting it and secure the child against going back to the tribe. 21

The white fathers of those children were so miserably mean and heartless as to do absolutely nothing for them. They should not allow them to grow up in the camps where they combine the vices of the blacks with the cunning which came to them from their white blood, and thus become a danger to the State and a source of shame and disgrace to the white population. 22

The preoccupation the white community had with removing the part-Aboriginal children from their mothers and the influences of the tribe is clearly reflected in Christina Smith’s account of a Bunganditj woman,
Wegearmin, and her part-Aboriginal child, Jenny (or Jane - Smith seemed to confuse the name halfway through her narrative).\textsuperscript{23} It seems clear that Wegearmin was abandoned by the father of the child and returned with the child to be with her own people. Smith was obviously extremely keen to get her hands on Jenny in order that she could fulfil her task of ‘rescu[ing] the immortal spirits of these wild beings, by God’s help, from the dire consequences of ignorance and sin’.\textsuperscript{24} Smith and her husband realised that the name of Jenny’s father, Mr Morgan, had ‘become a word of terror’ to the natives because it was rumoured that Morgan would come and take Wegearmin away.\textsuperscript{25} Thus, the Smiths resorted to frightening Wegearmin into giving them Jenny:

As soon as we received, through friendly blacks, this intelligence, we spoke boldly of Morgan’s intention that Jane [sic] should be in our care, and sent messages to the effect that Jane must be sent to Rivoli Bay.\textsuperscript{26}

This did not work, but eventually Jenny was delivered into the care of Mr and Mrs Smith by Wegearmin’s Aboriginal husband.\textsuperscript{27} Smith makes the comment: ‘Now,’ said I, ‘I have gained my object’.\textsuperscript{28}

There is no discussion by Smith about the tragedy of Wegearmin’s position, how she might have felt about being abandoned or losing her child or why she eventually decided to hand the child over to the Smiths. There is no indication that Smith spared a single thought for the mother of Jenny - she was only concerned with gaining her ‘object’, Jenny. This is despite the fact that it was clear to many of the white community that Aboriginal family ties were extremely strong:

2151. Have you noticed, amongst the natives, generally, an affection between the members of a family? - Very great; much more so than amongst white families.\textsuperscript{29}

It is also to be noted that Smith received payments from the government for the part-Aboriginal children she had in her care.\textsuperscript{30} It appears, however, that the Aboriginal mothers were not similarly supported:
There are in many parts of my district several half-caste children whose fathers have abandoned them to a wurley life, a life of certain degradation...\textsuperscript{31}

Thus, Aboriginal women were left to care for their part-Aboriginal children without assistance whereas white women were given financial support. This was a government policy that certainly did not consider the well-being of Aboriginal women.

The third issue of concern to the white population about sexual relationships between black women and white men was the lack of moral virtue of Aboriginal women. I suggest that it was only those women who had been forcibly taken by white men for ‘immoral purposes’ who received any sympathy from the white community. For the rest, the presumption was that Aboriginal women had little virtue and were involved in relations with white men because of their ‘loose’ values:

We owe it to the aboriginals... that no practicable means should be neglected of protecting them from inhuman treatment and temptation to fatal vices. The interference of Europeans and others with lubras is, especially, a cause of chronic trouble, and too frequent crime, and if the passions of white men and the easy virtue of black women forbid us to expect that immoral relations between the two races can be stopped, at least the law should be made strong enough to punish those who kidnap aboriginal females or take them into service solely for the purposes of prostitution.\textsuperscript{32}

When Moorhouse appeared before the 1860 Select Committee, he was asked about the history of the Aboriginal children who had been in the Adelaide schools. He stated that:

... The boys went into the country principally as shepherds and stock-keepers.
2494. And the girls went as lubras? - They went to the men, and they were generally found handy about the house. They frequently became bad, however.
2495. Couldn’t they, by being properly placed, receive any benefit? - Perhaps by being among European women. They generally
become common, however; and consequently, would not breed. They became, in fact, prostitutes...\textsuperscript{33}

Moorhouse appears to be assuming that the women became ‘bad’ because they were innately immoral. However, a story told by Sub-Protector Minchin gives us more of an idea why Aboriginal women at that time were becoming prostitutes. Minchin told of an Aboriginal woman who had died of starvation at Mount Remarkable, where he was stationed, because he had no government rations on hand. Later in his evidence, Minchin revealed that the woman was married to an aged and infirm Aboriginal man (which was a common situation for young Aboriginal women who were often promised to men many years older than themselves). Minchin stated that the husband was ‘totally unable to provide for [his wife] from age’.\textsuperscript{34} Minchin was further questioned on the topic:

384. You stated that the husband of the woman who died was old and infirm, and incapable of supporting his wife? - Yes.
385. What became of him? - He was still alive when I left Mount Remarkable.
386. How was he supported? - Principally through me.
387. Do I understand that you supported the man and that the woman died of starvation? - Yes.\textsuperscript{35}

I suggest that work was not easily found by Aboriginal women. There was lots of station work for Aboriginal men (and some women), as evidenced by Moorhouse’s observations quoted previously, but often the women were not employed. They were often left to care for the old and sick when the young men went off to work on the stations:

2444. Did the blacks last season go to the harvest? - Oh yes; they all leave their camps in the harvest time and go to reap.
2445. How are the aged, sick and infirm supported then during this period? - They are left in charge of the lubras.\textsuperscript{36}

Further, in European society it was the place of the woman to be engaged in homemaking and not in paid work. No doubt, this set of European values was imposed on Aboriginal society, leaving the women without paid work. At the
same time, Aboriginal women were unable to live off the land as they had previously done as they were being moved from their own country and the native flora and fauna were diminishing quickly in the face of competition with cattle, sheep and crops. To add to this situation, government policy, particularly in the time of the 1860 Select Committee, was only to provide supplies to the aged and infirm. This left young Aboriginal women quite often completely in the cold, with no means of supporting themselves. It is suggested that Aboriginal women were forced, by their circumstances, to become prostitutes and their moral virtue, or lack thereof, had little to do with their choice. The plight of young Aboriginal women of that time is demonstrated by the evidence given by a young widow, ‘Lubra Parako’, to the Select Committee. Parako stated that only the old received blankets and flour and the young ones had to work for theirs. She said there was no medicine for their sickness in the winter. She had given birth to a still-born child and when asked what killed the child, Parako replied ‘I was bad myself’. It may well have been that Parako was involved in prostitution, given her circumstances.

George Taplin acknowledged, to a certain degree, the difficulties faced by Aboriginal women in his area:

This [decrease in Aboriginal births] arises, in some instances, from prostitution. I am well aware that the temptations held out by white men to the native girls are constant and attractive, especially to those who can earn so little money - and also especially as held out by the superior race to the inferior. I notice that decent chaste women among the natives almost invariably have large families.

Even if the women were not prostitutes in the ordinary sense of the word, it may well have been that part of their duties as housekeepers on stations involved performing sexual favours for the men of the house. In Christina Smith’s discussion of ‘Caroline’ or Mingboaram, she noted that Mingboaram was given ‘tucker’, a blanket, tobacco and a bit of alcohol for her husband as part of her payment for working on a station near Mount Gambier. Smith notes that Mingboaram gave birth to three part-Aboriginal children (one of whom died) whilst she was in the employ of these white settlers. Smith does
not question this occurrence at all and there is no discussion of the immorality of the white father/s of these children. In fact, Smith feels sympathy for Mingboaram’s husband:

Her husband paid very little regard to her, and his neglect could scarcely be wondered at, considering her previous unfaithfulness.\(^{40}\)

Smith assumes that the birth of Mingboaram’s part-Aboriginal children was the result of immorality on Mingboaram’s part - her ‘unfaithfulness’. However, it could be suggested that Mingboaram was used for sexual purposes by her white employers on the stations and when she became pregnant was discarded by the father/s of her children.

In this paper I have discussed what I consider to be three of the major concerns of the white community in South Australia regarding the forcible taking and abuse of Aboriginal women by white settlers. I have suggested that the white community were not, for the most part, concerned for the women themselves. Rather, the first major concern was warfare between black men and white men resulting from the misuse by white men of Aboriginal women. Secondly, there was concern over the birth of part-Aboriginal children and the drain on the public purse they would become if they were not removed from their Aboriginal mothers and the tribal life. Thirdly, although some concern was shown for the Aboriginal women who were forcibly taken by white men and were being corrupted, no sympathy was felt for those Aboriginal women who were forced to engage in sexual relationships with white men because of their inability to support themselves. I have attempted to shed some light on the ‘other side’ of the story by bringing attention to the difficulties faced by Aboriginal women in their desperate situations. Unfortunately, this task is very difficult and can only be done by guesswork, as the voice of Aboriginal women in the early days of settlement in South Australia was quite firmly silenced by the prevailing European male perspective that was taken on almost every issue affecting Aboriginal people in those times.

ibid., p. 475.

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ibid.

ibid.

ibid.

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*Advertiser*, 8 July 1901, p. 5.


Evidence of Dr Wyatt, ibid., p. 30.

W. R Thompson, Wallanippie (Western District), in Sub-Protector’s Report, 31 December, 1874, p. 5.


Bishop of Carpentaria quoted in *Advertiser*, 27 August 1901, p. 7.


ibid., p. 100.

ibid., p. 101.

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ibid., p. 101-102.

Smith, 1880, p. 91 and Sub-Protector’s Report, J. H. Biggs, 28 April 1873.

Sub-Protector Buttfeld’s report for 30 June 1868, p. 3.

‘The Aborigines Bill’ in *Advertiser*, 20 November 1899, p. 4.


ibid., p. 20.

ibid., p. 21.


Evidence of ‘Lubra Parako’, ibid., p. 100.

G. Taplin in Report from Protector of Aborigines for Six Months ended June 30 1867, p. 1. (my emphasis)

Smith, p. 85-86.

Smith, p. 87.