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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Editorial .................................................. 1

**ARTICLES**

The View from Below: A Selected History of Contact Experiences, Patjarr, Gibson Desert, Western Australia
*Jan Turner* ........................................... 13

Finding the Signatures of Glass Beads: A Preliminary Investigation of Indigenous Artefacts from Australia and Papua New Guinea
*Lindy Allen, Sarah Babister, Elizabeth Bonshek and Rosemary Goodall* ........... 48

‘Necessary Self-Defence?’: Pastoral Control and Ngarrindjeri Resistance at Waltowa Wetland, South Australia
*Kelly Wiltshire, Mirani Litster and Grant Rigney* ........................................ 81

‘The Missionary Factor’: Frontier Interaction on Cooper Creek, South Australia, in the 1860s
*Joc Schmiechen* ..................................... 115

Koeler and the Dresdners: Contrasting Views of Five Early Germans Towards Indigenous Peoples in South Australia
*Robert Amery* ........................................ 145

Capturing Histories at Thantyi-wanparda: Comparing Early and Late Twentieth Century Ethnographies in Arabana Territory, South Australia
*Jason Gibson and Luise Hercus* ................... 175

65,000 Years of Isolation in Aboriginal Australia or Continuity and External Contacts? An Assessment of the Evidence with an Emphasis on the Queensland Coast
*Michael J. Rowland* ................................. 211
‘THE MISSIONARY FACTOR’: FRONTIER
INTERACTION ON COOPER CREEK, SOUTH AUSTRALIA, IN THE 1860s

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Abstract

The German Moravian and Lutheran efforts to establish missions at Lakes Kopperamanna and Killalpaninna in the far north of South Australia in the 1860s during a period of escalating conflict between pastoral settlers and Aboriginal Traditional Owners provides a classic case study of frontier interaction. It highlights particularly the importance and effect of missionary presence as a key factor in the survival of many Aboriginal groups throughout Australia, against the relentless impacts of colonisation. This paper describes and interprets the key events prior to, during and after the missionaries’ arrival at Cooper Creek, and the role they played in the clash of competing cultural, economic and world views of European pastoral settlement and the Dieri occupants of the contested land. Drawing on the author’s earlier research, this paper adds further detail to later works by other researchers that have described in part the events that took place in the Cooper Creek region in the 1860s. The available historical records indicate that Sir Thomas Elder, one of the leading colonial figures, in concert with his northern station managers, was advocating extreme measures to remove the ‘Aboriginal threat’ to his expanding pastoral enterprise. Had the missionaries not arrived in the district, forcing greater government engagement and providing a refuge, the Dieri may well have suffered similar decimation like other adjacent Aboriginal groups. The Lutheran missionary efforts at Killalpaninna and other locations, despite their often attributed negative impacts on Aboriginal cultural foundations, provided the means for the adaptation and survival of many language groups. In translating Aboriginal languages into written form they provided by far their most lasting legacy facilitating, in part, today’s cultural revival.
Introduction

In 1970, whilst translating early records of the Hermannsburg Mission Society in South Africa, I discovered that this same organisation had sent missionaries to South Australia (SA) in 1866. My interest was aroused as to how these stoic, pious Lutherans, who had spread Christianity to the warlike Zulu of South Africa, would fare with the vastly different cultures of Australian Aboriginal peoples. On further enquiry I discovered that copious records, letters and diaries from their endeavours in the far north of SA and Central Australia were held in an old villa in North Adelaide, which housed the original Lutheran Archives. This was a treasure trove of primary material, all written in old German Gothic script that had, to that time, never been subject to any major research. I was fortunate that my mother had taught me to read this old script and I became immersed in the unfolding story of one of the epic pioneering ventures on the expanding frontier of the South Australian colony.

The German missionaries were meticulous recorders providing a firsthand account of frontier interaction as the European settlement took over Dieri traditional lands. Unknowingly, they arrived in the middle of an escalating conflict between the pastoralists and local Aboriginal people, the Dieri, over the diminishing water and rangeland resources. Parts of this story have been referred to in various accounts, starting with George Farwell’s classic 1950 _Land of Mirage_, and, more recently, Foster and Nettelbeck (2012) (see also Bonython 1971; Clyne 1987; Mattingley and Hampton 1988; Schmiechen 1971, 2004; Stevens 1994). This paper, using original sources and the missionaries’ direct accounts, fills in gaps in this story and reveals some of the political, media, pastoral and religious manipulations of the main proponents in the ensuing events, including the role of Sir Thomas Elder, one of SA’s leading benefactors.
Historical Background

Much of Australia's early exploratory efforts were driven by settlers and colonial entrepreneurs seeking new lands and pastures to further their economic interests. The first explorations into the Lake Eyre/Cooper Creek region (Figure 1) commenced in 1845, with Charles Sturt's Central Australian Expedition (Sturt 1849). Local and overseas interest was aroused by the ill-fated 'Victorian Exploring Expedition' led by Robert O'Hara Burke and William John Wills, who departed Melbourne in 1860 in a race to be the first to cross Australia from south to north. Notable mainly for the deaths of Burke and Wills, and the miraculous survival of King on the banks of Cooper Creek, this tragic venture stimulated a spate of rescue expeditions. Experienced explorers and bushmen including Howitt, Walker, Landsborough and McKinlay led searches that opened up vast tracts of inland Australia. Their reports paved the way for a surge of settlers bringing hoofed animals, metal tools, guns and desirable items, such as flour, sugar, tobacco and alcohol, to the interior (Reynolds 1972:40). This added a new dimension to the country that was to prove largely detrimental to the original inhabitants and their ways of life. Howitt (as cited in Hankel 2010:53) commented:

The return of all the search parties terminated the episode of the Burke and Wills Expedition: the eastern half of the continent had been crossed and recrossed. It was no longer considered an unknown and desert tract, but a pastoral region of the greatest possibilities, to be occupied by adventurous pastoral pioneers.

In these earliest stages of settler-Aboriginal interaction, conflict and violent clashes were common occurrences on the evolving frontier (Bonython 1971; Davidson et al. 2004; Farwell 1983; Foster and Nettelbeck 2012; Foster et al. 2001; Gibbs 1959, 2013; Hercus 1990; Jones and Sutton 1986; Mattingley and Hampton 1988; Reynolds 1972, 1981; Roberts 1978; Schmichchen 1971, 2004; Stevens 1994). This proved to be the case in the far north of South Australia in the 1860s, as the first pastoral runs were established by Thomas Elder, following
Howitt’s initial exploration. The Dieri actively resisted the settlers’ invasion and many of the early squatters had to fight for the possession of their runs, with bloodshed on both sides (Farwell 1983:62).

Figure 1 Location Map of Lake Eyre/Cooper Creek Region showing Aboriginal Language Groups. Source: Aiston and Horne (1924).
The Dieri

The area around Lake Hope and Cooper Creek was occupied by the Dieri with four neighbouring tribes—Yandrawontha (Yandruwantha), Yarrawaurka (Yawarawarka), Ngamini and Wongkaaooroo (Wangkangurru)—sharing similar languages and festivals (Gason 1879:257). A complex linguistic network was further linked by comparable social structures with a matrilineal moiety system, and similar but not identical kinship systems. Trade and exchange, as well as mythological and ritual associations, also connected different language groups across the region (Hercus 1990:151). The Dieri were fiercely independent people who had successfully adapted to the harsh and unpredictable environment. Early estimates placed their numbers at around 1030 to 3000 people, incorporating a number of distinct clan groups (Gason 1879; Howitt 1878; Jones and Sutton 1986). Similar to other desert peoples, the Dieri were semi-nomadic, moving in well-defined estates. They readily adjusted to the ‘boom and bust’ cycles, spreading out when rain filled the clay pans and ephemeral lakes provided plentiful game and native foods, and withdrawing to permanent waterholes in Cooper Creek in times of drought (Jones and Sutton 1986:22).

The explorer A.W. Howitt (1904:247), on his two exploratory journeys across the region in 1861–62, was amongst the first Europeans to encounter the Dieri (Figure 2). He commented on how they perceived the impending intrusion, recounting that Jalina, head of the Kunara totem, expressed his concern about the increasing number of ‘white men’ coming to their lands and asked Howitt to tell them that they should:

Sit down on the one side of Pando (Lake Hope), and the Kana (people) would sit down on the other so that they would not be likely to quarrel.

This early attempt at a negotiated approach to settlement was a rarity in the frontier colonial landscape. Howitt reminisced that as part of Jalina’s request, ‘I promised to attend to if I saw the whitefellow on my way to Adelaide’ (Hankel 2010:53). Yet little came of this promise and it was completely ignored by the
subsequent actions of the pastoralists who followed to the lands of the Dieri. Police Trooper Samuel Gason (1879:258), the first police presence in the area, prophetically noted that occupying the Dieri territory would not be a smooth path:

The tribe is numerous, and if they knew (and it is feared they will eventually learn) their own power, the present white inhabitants could not keep them down, or for one day retain their possessions.

Figure 2 Explorer Howitt meeting with Dieri at Cooper Creek—early postcard. Source Lutheran Archive.

Conflicting World Views and Economic Imperatives

Early Aboriginal curiosity and tolerance of the newcomers soon changed as their ongoing presence and detrimental impacts on traditional life became increasingly apparent. Curr (1886–1887:104), an astute observer of the early colonial frontier, accurately summed up the ensuing interaction:

In the first place the meeting of the Aboriginal tribe of Australia and the White pioneer, results as a rule in war, which lasts from six months to ten years, accordingly to the nature of the country, the amount of settlement which takes place in a neighbourhood, and the productivities of the individuals concerned. When several squatters settle in proximity, and the country they occupy is easy of access and without fastness to which Blacks can retreat, the period of warfare is usually short and the bloodshed not excessive. On the other hand, in districts which are not easily traversed on horseback, in which the Whites are few in numbers and food is procurable by the Blacks in fastness, the term is usually prolonged and the slaughter more considerable.
The European economic system, based on stock grazing, placed serious stresses on Aboriginal ways of life, where survival depended on a fine balance with the environment. The deep spiritual connection to land which was apportioned amongst food gathering groups on a kinship and spiritual, as much as an economic basis, was a cornerstone of Aboriginal nations (Berndt and Berndt 1951:33). The seeming simplicity of the Dieri traditional material culture belied the complexity of its religious and social depth, and remained largely invisible to the Europeans who came into early contact with them (Jones and Sutton 1986:23). Their vastly different world views formed the basis of many misunderstandings, resistance and increasing clashes over the prime resources each group needed to sustain themselves.

Unlike in the foundation convict colonies on the eastern seaboard a more benevolent approach to race relations was enshrined in the Proclamation of South Australia, though made little practical difference to the outcomes of colonisation. Established as the only Australian free colony in 1836, SA was founded on strongly humanitarian principles with Aboriginal people placed under the protection of the rule of law as British subjects (Hemmings et al. 2008; Foster and Nettelbeck 2012:9). Governor Hindmarsh was given clear instructions by the British Colonial Office that Aboriginal rights were to be protected (Gibbs 1959:40). In practice this approach was never seriously implemented and most forms of protection were focused on the needs of the settlers pushing their economic advancement ever northwards, to the detriment of any Aboriginal groups in the way (Gale 1960:21; Gibbs 2013:408). Pearson (2015:24) put this even more forcefully:

I have always understood that protection worked in concert with frontier dispossession, and facilitated it.
Pastoral Expansion and Simmering Conflict

From the 1840s the expansion of the white settlement away from the colonial capital of Adelaide was creating increasing resistance by Aboriginal groups in the outlying districts. The settlers saw themselves as owners of the lands they took up and not as dispossessing the original inhabitants: increasingly they demanded government action to protect their rights and interests (Gibbs 2013:408). The police commissioners of the day consistently had to deal with ‘thefts by natives in the country’ and a general order was issued in 1844 by Finniss sanctioning the use of arms where police had a warrant of arrest. This was to have ongoing implications for years to come (Clyne1987:93). In the Flinders Ranges the continual theft of sheep forced the government to establish regular food depots. Henry Minchin, Sub-protector of Aborigines in Pt Augusta (CSO1 1853:1253 and 1853) was dispatched with two constables to Mt Brown with the aim:

...to induce the wild natives from the hills to live at his station, and by keeping them some time in contact with himself and the police, so far to civilise them as to render them not only harmless but useful to the settlers.

The Burke and Wills expedition and subsequent relief efforts in 1860 aroused settler interest in the Cooper Creek region. In the same year, Thomas Elder established two pastoral runs, Lake Hope Station, managed by H. Dean, and Manuwaulkaninna, near Lake Gregory, controlled by B. Hack (Farwell 1983:140). Elder was a leading businessman, pastoralist and member of the SA Legislative Council and was knighted in 1878 for his services to the colony. His efforts to establish a pastoral economy around Lake Hope and the surrounding region soon aroused the anger of the Dieri, whose elders had already indicated their concerns to the explorer Howitt, and sought some accommodation with the settlers’ encroachment.

Adding fuel to the ensuing conflict Lakes Kopperamanna, Killalpaninna and Perigundi were of particular importance to the Dieri and their neighbouring groups, not only because they generally contained good water, a scarce

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1 See references for acronym details.
commodity at the best of times, but also for their ceremonial and traditional significance (Bonython 1971:5; Farwell 1983:150; McBryde 2004; Proeve and Proeve 1952:66; Stevens 1994:25—see also the Petition to CSO by Walder March 1867). It had already become apparent in the outer areas of the colonial settlements that pastoralism presented a massive challenge to Aboriginal society, altering ecologies and disrupting most aspects of traditional life (Reynolds 1981:130). Equally it was commonly accepted that Aboriginal people and the grazing of animals didn’t mix, and there was often a concerted effort by pastoralists to drive Aboriginal people away from key water sources (Reynolds 1981:129). This became even more acute in periods of drought, when the settlers’ herds decreased the native game and competed for diminishing water sources. Reynolds (1972:1) described the essence of frontier interaction as:

...good intentions and benevolent policies notwithstanding, the very act of settlement implied that whenever the Aborigines confronted the encroaching newcomer they would be crushed.

**Frontier War**

The many violent clashes between settlers and Aboriginal people that permeated the expanding pastoral frontiers throughout Australia were never seen as war in the traditional European sense, with clearly defined battle lines such as took place with the Zulus in South Africa, or the Native Americans in the United States. The skirmishes that took place in the Australian rangelands tended to be localised and more in the form of ‘hit and run’ guerilla tactics. Foster et al. (2001:8) described the pattern of violence as:

The undeclared war of the Australian frontier produced a culture of secrecy, ensuring that much of what happened would be clothed in euphemisms, and the knowledge transmitted with all the accuracy of a Chinese whisper.
The idea of dealing with troublesome Aboriginal people in a warlike manner, even if undeclared, certainly permeated colonial thinking and actions. When Police Commissioner Warburton in 1863 decided to increase police resources in the remote regions and issue his men with breech loading carbines, J. Walker, Protector of Aborigines, expressed his concerns about such ‘warlike preparations’, stating that Aboriginal people were British subjects and should be treated equally under the law. Warburton responded that he would rescind his ‘warlike preparations’ if Walker’s appeasement of the Aboriginal people proved successful (Foster and Nettelbeck 2012:112). Although the more sparsely occupied SA frontier did not have the extent of warfare experienced in the other colonies (Gibbs 2013:410), the ensuing skirmishes between the Dieri and Elder’s men had all the elements of frontier war.

The extended drought in the late 1860s severely impacted the Dieri’s normal hunter-gatherer lifestyle, with game ever more scarce and the last remaining waterholes now critical for both the Dieri and the settlers’ stock:

> The natives themselves are wandering around about famished and have been driven by sheer starvation to kill settlers’ cattle. This, of course, been resisted, and an alternative of starvation or violence alone remained. (Advertiser, 13 December 1865)

Reflecting the sentiments of the proclamation edicts and showing some understanding of the Aboriginal links to land, the Advertiser (13 December 1865) went further to take a more humanitarian view on the problems in the north:

> The natives have thus no refuge from direct want. Even if there were better country within their reach they could not safely avail themselves of it, for the boundaries of tribal territories are pretty sharply defined, and all trespass sternly and vigorously resisted. Starvation seems the doom of the poor creatures unless we do something to avert it. It is a call of positive duty as well as humanity.
We call the aborigines British subjects and therefore cannot consistently leave them to perish of want. We must not forget that we have brought upon them this suffering and starvation. It is true we could not avert the drought, but we brought the country into the state that made the drought so disastrous.

At Lake Hope the situation left little room for such fine sentiments and, responding to the increasing spearing of cattle, Dean retaliated by burning three Dieri camps:

To such an extent had the native plunderings gone, that it had become a question whether the settlers should drive the blacks away or the whether the blacks should drive away the settlers. Feeling compelled to defend the property entrusted to his care Mr Dean had burnt down three of the aboriginal camps; after which four men followed the aboriginals up the country until the neighborhood of Lake Hope appeared to be pretty well cleared of them.

(Express, 29 December 1865)

These incidents escalated when Dean began moving stock to Lake Perigundi, a prime waterhole and important ceremonial site. The Dieri were incensed at this ongoing usurping of their hunting grounds without barter or negotiation. They saw Dean’s latest move as an attempt to seize their last water, and determined to make a stand.

The confrontation that followed, with fatal consequences, was extensively reported in the press of the day. Elder also provided firsthand information in Parliament as a member of the Legislative Council. In the process of taking over the area around Lake Perigundi, Dean and eight of his men were ambushed at night, with several speared and seriously injured and at least one Aboriginal reported killed (Express, December 1865). The Express and Advertiser sided strongly with the settlers, and gave extensive accounts drawn on information provided directly by Elder. The rival Register and Observer expressed a much more conciliatory view. The Register (13 December 1865) responding in part to the ‘affray in the neighbourhood of Lake Hope’ wrote:
that we have not unnecessarily used our strength against the weakness of the blacks, that while we have appropriated their lands and are making a better use of them than they could have done we are at the same time not unmindful of their interests, we may point to recent acts of the Government in reply to the challenge. We want to act rightly towards them, and to give them compensation for that of which our presence has deprived them.

The Register and Observer’s (30 December 1865) reporting of the clash at Lake Perigundi was questioned by the Express on the same day as inaccurate and not properly acknowledged:

...the Register and Observer produced a garbled version of our article, disguised so as to avoid the necessity of acknowledgement, but blundered so as to lead to considerable misunderstanding.

The Express (30 December 1865) took particular umbrage at the accusation that:

Mr Dean and his party had committed an aggressive and wanton attack upon the aboriginals in the Far North, whereas the measures they adopted were dictated by absolute necessity, and were of the most purely self-defensive character.

This may well have been the case in the attack that ensued at Lake Perigundi, but certainly all the incidents leading up to this clash had been largely due to Dean’s earlier forcible methods which Farwell (1983:141) described thus:

...Dean resorted to force, determined—in the words of one historian—“to establish the authority of the white man.” This authority virtually took the form of military action, a declaration of war.

The government now became concerned that the situation in the area appeared to be getting out of hand and determined it was time to implement some protection; not so much for the rights of the Aboriginal people, who had just grounds for their actions, but rather for the settlers and Elder’s interests (Schmiechen 1971:34). In 1865 a request to parliament for more police protection in the region had been dismissed as unnecessary. The Police Commissioner was aware of the settlers concerns with
Aboriginal people killing cattle but did not think the remedy lay in shooting ‘the plunderers’, and felt the settlers should be taking more care to alleviate the situation. Only if this was ineffective would he recommend aid be given by the government (SAPP 1865:No. 134).

Letters to Elder from his manager and men on the frontline had a ready solution to resolve the issue with the Dieri. George Reynolds wrote:

Harry thinks you should come as soon as you can. We shall not be able to settle the country without more hands and he wants you to send Truman, and get some more good men for hire; also some Terry and Enfield cartridges—the Terries 30—core and the Enfields, the Government arm.

Dean made a similar plea:

We must have more men and more arms to defend our position and our property, otherwise the country will have to be abandoned by the settlers.
(Advertiser, 6 January 1866)

The Express (29 December 1965) also noted that Elder:

...with his accustomed praiseworthy promptitude, has determined to dispatch Mr. Hack and a party to the scene of the conflict.

It was not clear if the government’s subsequent intervention into Dean’s campaign was prompted by disagreement with his methods of shooting the so-called ‘plunderers’ or if it felt his precautions and efforts had been insufficient under the circumstances. The government’s actions were possibly hastened by a letter to the Chief Secretary from Elder requesting the loan of some rifles and revolvers for the use of his overseers at Lake Hope. Interestingly, this letter has disappeared from the official archives along with the scant reference in police reports of the earlier clashes prior to Lake Perigundi (Foster and Nettelbeck 2012:116; Schmiechen 1971:37). Although the government had often turned a blind eye to the treatment of the Aboriginal people on the frontier as a concession to the settlers’
interests, it could not sanction the supply of arms for a private war. The Chief Secretary’s reply to Elder was adamant on this point:

The Government considers they would not be justified in supplying arms and ammunition for use against the natives to persons not directly responsible to the Executive. They have, however, taken prompt measures for ensuring the safety of the settlers at Lake Hope.

(CSO January 1866)

A police party under Inspector Roe, accompanied by the Protector of Aborigines, was sent to the area to investigate the situation and restore order (SAGG:720; Walker 1866). This show of force had the desired effect of temporarily curbing the Aboriginal people’s active resistance to the intrusions of the settlers. Most of the Dieri had been cleared off the properties owned by Elder, and his managers saw their position as secured from any further threats. It seems that the Dieri had quickly discovered the futility of matching spears against guns. For the time being, the majority of Aboriginal people in the area had dispersed to avoid the possibility of a confrontation with the police troopers sent to punish those who had participated in the ambush at Lake Perigundi.

**The Missionary Factor**

In the founding years of the colony, the Lutherans played a major part in missionary activity amongst the local Kaurna inhabitants of the Adelaide plains. Along with financing the first wave of German immigrants to the colony, George Fife Angas supported Pastor Kavel, the leader of this band of Lutheran dissidents, in his desire to involve the Dresden Mission Society in working with the Kaurna. In 1838 C.W. Schürmann and C.A. Teichelmann arrived to start their missionary work (Proeve and Proeve 1952:14). Eduard Meyer followed to work with the Ramindjeri at Encounter Bay and ration stations along with government schools were established at Pirltawardli (in Adelaide), Encounter Bay and Port Lincoln. Schürmann was appointed as Deputy Protector of Aborigines (Proeve and Proeve 1952:19) and sent to Port Lincoln at the behest of the Governor where he found himself witnessing a bitter conflict, as the local Parnkalla
(Barngarla) people fiercely resisted the settlers and were subject to violent retribution (Clyne 1987:79; Foster and Nettelbeck 2012:44–49; Mattingley and Hampton 1988:41; Schürmann 1987). By the 1850s the schools had closed, all the mission stations failed and the Lutheran missionary effort at the local level was at an end (Proeve and Proeve 1952:19).

In 1862, after a brief hiatus, the urgings of J. Meischel, an ex-Leipzig Missionary in India now living in Adelaide, renewed interest in re-establishing a mission in northern SA (Proeve and Proeve 1952:24–25). It would appear that the circumstances connected to the search for the Burke and Wills expedition turned the Lutherans’ thoughts to the Cooper Creek/Lake Hope region (Proeve and Proeve1952:31). Negotiations were undertaken with the Hermannsburg Missionary Society, founded by the charismatic Pastor Louis Harms in 1849 and, after some initial concerns, he agreed in 1865 to partner a new missionary effort on the colony’s northern frontier. In a letter to the South Australian Lutheran Synods he set out some of the premises that underpinned the Hermannsburg philosophy (Proeve and Proeve 1952:36):

Furthermore I should like to know whether the conditions over there favour the sending of mission-colonists, partly farmers and partly tradesmen, whose work would benefit the mission, and perhaps soon contribute towards making the station self supporting; and the natives could by these means be profitably employed.

The presence of a strong German emigrant community in the Barossa Valley provided the local support for the ensuing Hermannsburg missionary efforts to Cooper Creek at Lakes Kopperamanna and Killalpaninna.
At the same time the Moravian Brethren from Herrenhut in Saxony, a different Protestant movement to the Lutherans, were also attracted to the Cooper Creek region by news of the Burke and Wills expedition. Already engaged in missionary activities in Victoria in 1862, the Moravians determined they would extend their activities northward to:

...bring the blessings of the Gospel to the still numerous tribes of newly discovered Burke-Land and Albert-Land, before the white settlers arrive with their diseases and brandy.  
(Proeve and Proeve 1952:62)

Both missionary groups provided a new factor in the evolving frontier interaction between the settlers and the Aboriginal inhabitants. In many cases the presence of missions offered Aboriginal people an additional alternative in their reactions to the settler intrusion. This becomes especially relevant when considering the impact of the European settlement on traditional ways of life, and illustrates how Aboriginal people exploited the missions to alleviate pressures on their traditional existence.

These pressures had already manifested themselves with Elder and Dean’s efforts to establish their pastoral presence at Lake Hope. Just prior to the first missionaries’ arrival the impact of the drought increased the already hostile reactions of the Dieri. Dean and Hack’s actions precipitated a series of violent altercations that may well have had disastrous consequences for the future survival of the Dieri had it not been for the fortuitous intervention of German missionaries.

Establishing the Missions

On 9 October 1866 the Hermannsburg missionaries, E. Homann and J.F. Gössling accompanied by lay-helper H.H. Vogelsang, fresh from Germany, and local Brother J.E. Jacob, set out with their goods and chattels from Tanunda on a three month journey into the interior (Figure 3) (Proeve and Proeve 1952:53). At the time of their arrival at Lake Hope, the interaction between the settlers and Aboriginal people following the altercations at Lake Perigundi, was in a state of simmering hostility (Schmiechen 1971:37). Lake Hope was seen as an unsuitable location to establish the mission, given a lack of Aboriginal people in the immediate area, and the impact of Elder’s cattle enterprise. The
Moravians, who had arrived earlier, selected Lake Kopperamanna (60 km to the south west). The Hermannsburg missionaries followed suit and decided on Lake Killalpaninna, c. 15 km to the west of Lake Kopperamanna (Proeve and Proeve 1952:68).

Figure 3 Hermannsburg Missionaries setting out from Tanunda for Cooper Creek 1866. Source: Lutheran Archive.

Apart from the reportedly large numbers of Aboriginal people around Lake Killalpaninna, the Hermannsburg missionaries saw several other distinct advantages in this site for a mission. Gössling, in a letter from Manuwaulkaninna, had expressed the view that two such different enterprises as a mission and a cattle station needed their own areas if they were not to hamper each other. This made Killalpaninna a good site because it was well removed from the nearest cattle stations (KMZ 25 February 1867). Even more important to the missionaries was the fact that there were no other Europeans in the immediate vicinity (KMZ 21 January 1867).
The missionaries had not looked kindly on the settlers’ actions in the area and it appeared that the Hermannsburg missionaries’ fears about the evils of European colonisation among Aboriginal peoples had been well founded. In one letter Gössling (HM December 1866) was most outspoken on this point:

Christianity already had to make good two misdeeds, one being the fact that Europeans were destroying these people with their sins and the other that a mission had not been established earlier.

In the first days of the Killalpaninna mission, relations were tentative on both sides. Aboriginal people soon showed a desire for European food and goods, particularly tobacco. The missionaries did not hesitate to take advantage of this by giving ‘hand outs’ in return for services. This pattern was to become well established as the mission developed. In many cases this system of rewards became the main inducement for Aboriginal cooperation and Homann (KMZ March 1867) wrote how the Aboriginal people had helped in building the station in return for bread, tea and tobacco. However, a serious misunderstanding arose almost immediately when, as was customary among the tribes in that region, Aboriginal men offered women to the missionaries as a gesture of friendship. This custom was widespread and common to many Aboriginal groups throughout Australia, forming an important part of traditional protocols to welcome and establish peaceful interchange (Reynolds 1981:57). The missionaries, unlike many settlers, reacted with extraordinary hostility. They looked on the custom as further proof of the Aboriginal peoples’ sinful, animalistic state and drove the hospitable men away with whips (HM April 1867). Gössling (KMZ April 1867) reported that this led to much noise in the Aboriginal camp and the tribesmen became very threatening. There is little doubt that this outright affront to the Aboriginal peoples’ traditional ways led to increased feelings of hostility and placed the missionaries at serious risk.
Forced Withdrawal

Not long after this incident an even greater threat to the Moravian and Lutheran missions was posed by a large corroboree at Lake Perigundi, attended by Aboriginal from all parts of northeast SA. Tribes from hundreds of miles away began to congregate at Lakes Perigundi and Kopperamanna to attend one of the periodic festivals held at these locations. On this occasion, the gathering of the tribes was to have a more sinister purpose than just conducting the traditional ceremonies: ‘the Aborigines intended to kill all the whites and those blacks who worked for them’ (Gössling in KMZ March 1867). The earlier clashes with the settlers, especially Dean and Hack, had not been forgotten and the adverse pressures of the European economy on the Aboriginal way of life further fed growing resentment towards the white intruders. Led by the Perigundians, the tribesmen decided to renew hostilities, driven by the above-stated intentions. The missionaries had been informed that one of the main purposes for this corroboree was to organise the death of all whites. Gössling (KMZ April 1867) took these events very lightly:

We have been told that the blacks around here like us but others at Perigundi would lead the massacre. However, threatening and doing are two different things. The blacks are as cowardly as rabbits.

He was soon forced to revise his opinion.

Despite the missionaries’ hopes of being spared from the Aboriginal peoples’ anger, it was apparent that the missions were to be the first subjects of the gathering tribes’ hostility. As yet Aboriginal people could see little difference between the motives of missionaries versus those of settlers. The fact that the missions occupied places which were important trade and ceremonial centres would have only aggravated the situation. Initially the Aboriginal peoples’ renewed outbreak of hostilities was directed against the missionaries. This was prompted by the missionaries’ apparently weak reactions to the Aboriginal peoples’ first hostile probing that did not engender the usual
response with firearms. Unlike the settlers, the missionaries believed that shooting Aboriginal people in self-defence was contrary to their Christian principles; any such action would have ended any hope of successfully carrying out their mission work. This attitude proved extremely frustrating to the local police, causing Police Commissioner Hamilton to question the very presence of missionaries in such remote and dangerous areas (CSO April 1867:692/67).

The missionaries’ situation became more tenuous as growing numbers of people gathered in the area and the movement of tribesmen between Lakes Perigundi, Kopperamanna and Killalpaninna increased. The infrequent police patrols did little to avert the growing threat. The tribesmen had even informed the police that they would not rest until they had cleared the whites from Kopperamanna and Killalpaninna (KMZ April 1867).

The Moravian missionary H. Walder (GRG 5/1867) drafted a petition on behalf of both mission groups to the Chief Secretary seeking a grant of an Aboriginal reserve of 100 square miles:

Reason for recommending so large a block is, the numerousness of Natives, which would prevent Stockholders to settle at this very place, as the Settlers about here themselves say, of which the S. Protector Mr Buttfield is also aware.

The simmering hostility of the Aboriginal people soon became apparent to the missionaries and Walder added that the circumstances were now so dire that they feared for all their lives:

Most of the Natives, who hitherto showed but friendship, have, with great numbers from all quarters, forged the indeed black design to kill all the ”Whitefellows.”

This prompted an earnest plea for ongoing police protection, ‘the Government might be pleased to place under police protection, as speedily as possible’, and at the very least consideration of shifting the existing police station from Lake Hope to Kopperamanna. Pre-empting the additional costs and likely negative reaction of this request in some circles, Walder closed by stating:
True, the Government do not get return from us in the shape of rent; but here are seven lives at stake of the same value as Settlers’. And indeed Government will get returns from us, if we do succeed in carrying out our Mission, for, I am sure the country would round about soon be taken out, of other benefits not even to make mention.

Walder’s request predicted that a successful mission would alleviate the ongoing tensions and hostilities that had been generated by the Dieri reaction to the settlers’ pastoral expansion. It would provide a secure refuge and focus for the Aboriginal people in the region, and bring peace to this part of the frontier. First, however, the evolving threat to the establishment of the two missions had to be dealt with. Several hostile encounters with the gathering tribesmen forced the Moravians to join the Lutherans at Killalpaninna. This postponed the sending of the petition allowing for a more urgent post-script detailing how colonist Vogelsang had only just managed to escape being speared and the Moravians’ reaction:

And now, seeing again plainly, that the Natives are still devising mischief, & that through the growing concourse the danger was growing, — we resolved to flee to our Lutheran friends.

(GrG 5/1867)

As the besieged missionaries contemplated their situation, missionary Homann decided that under the circumstances the establishment of a mission was not worth ‘being killed and devoured by these savages’ (KMZ April 1867). He concluded that very little could be achieved by martyrdom as the Aboriginal people had not even been made aware of the Gospel and ‘death in such a case would be comparable to being killed by bandits’.

In the face of this ongoing hostility both missionary groups withdrew. They presented the point of least resistance in the wave of European intruders, and for the moment at least, the Dieri succeeded in driving the missionaries away. The settlers, who had been the original cause for their resentment, remained firmly entrenched. It is ironic that the very people the missionaries had come to save had succeeded in driving them
away—the one group who were to champion their ongoing survival.

The departure of the missionaries defused the buildup of hostile intentions and, in 1867, John Butfield, Sub-Protector of Aborigines in the Far North, summed up the situation in his report:

I have the honour to inform you that having accompanied Sergeant Wauchope and eight Troopers to Lake Hope, Kopperamanna, Killalpaninna and Lake Gregory I am now on my way to Headquarters. The Natives that had collected in large numbers at Perigundi, including the Deerea Koonaree, Ominee Yarrawarraka Cuddibirie, Yandrawandra and Pilladappa tribes have dispersed. It appeared from information I gathered that an unusually large concourse assembled at Perigundi—had a very grand Corroboree in the month of March and then and there devised a plan for exterminating the whole of the Settlers as far south as Blanchewater. It was their intention to murder the Missionaries first of all. The timely and unexpected arrival of three Police Troopers from Lake Hope prevented the execution of their diabolical intentions.

(Tolcher 1996:130)

**Reviving the Mission**

The gathering at Lake Perigundi was to be the last concentrated effort by Aboriginal people to repel the European intruders around Lake Hope. The Government reacted swiftly to the missionaries’ requests. Despite Police Commissioner Hamilton’s (CSO 1867:625) concerns at the pacifist approach of the missionaries, making them easy targets for retribution and the drain on the public purse, police protection for the missions was secured with the shift of the police station from Lake Hope to Lake Kopperamanna (CSO 1867:233). Furthermore each mission group was granted a 100 square mile reserve for Aboriginal people and the approval for an official ration depot (Proeve and Proeve 1952:88–91). The distribution of rations was to prove a decisive factor in the pattern of European-Aboriginal interaction. Without this function it seems likely that the missions would have been largely ineffective in attracting Aboriginal people. The Protector of Aborigines (Protector Aborigines Report March 1868) argued in favour the government continuing the supply of stores to the missions:
The denial of these stores will, it is to be feared, break up an establishment that promises to be of the greatest advantage to the Aborigines in the Far North.

After a break of some seven months, the Hermannsburg missionaries were once again ready to return to their missionary field. This second attempt in 1867 was to be better equipped than the first as a result of negotiations with the government. Led by Missionary Homann, along with colonists Vogelsang and Jacob with their respective wives and children, ten Germans returned to re-establish the mission at Lake Killalpaninna, now named Bethesda. The Moravians also returned to the field but their presence at Lake Kopperamanna was to be short-lived, and they returned to Victoria in 1868 (Jones and Sutton 1986:33).

Accommodation and Adaptation

For the Dieri there followed a growing acceptance that resorting to force was futile against the Europeans’ superior armaments, and they would have to find new ways of accommodating the pressures threatening their existence. The settlers and now missionaries with their flocks and herds became permanent factors in the environment. The Dieri soon realised that the settlers were dependent on them for labour, and in some cases sexual partners, for which they could obtain some of the settlers’ prized goods, such as tobacco, sugar, tea, flour and iron (Reynolds 1972, 1981; Rowse 1998). Once peaceful relations were established, pastoralists often tolerated some Aboriginal people as cheap labour to solve the chronic shortage of manpower (Reynolds 1972:40). In most cases the stations did not provide enough food and material goods to meet the demands of extended family groups. The missionaries soon realised that providing an agrarian working environment and preaching Christianity was a poor inducement to attract people, and used the distribution of the official government rations as a key means to engage the local population. The Dieri probably did not understand the missionaries’ motives but noticed the difference in attitude to those of the settlers, who generally saw their presence more of a hindrance than an asset.
Increasingly dispossessed from their traditional lands and hemmed in by the pressures of the settlers’ activities, the mission at Lake Killalpaninna provided a refuge from, and alternative means of responding to, these pressures. The distribution of rations now became a major factor in the pattern of adaptation that evolved. Both parties had something the other wanted; the missionaries hoped to save these people by converting them to Christianity, and the Dieri needed the Europeans’ food and goods to survive in the changing environment. This pattern was to become well established as the mission developed. In many cases this system of rewards became the main inducement for Aboriginal cooperation and an ongoing source of missionary frustration. This was to be the case for the duration of the mission and even as late as 1899 the missionaries reported that:

> Usually there are around 60–70 heathens in close proximity to the station, especially in times of drought when there is little natural sustenance in the land...however as soon as the rains set in then many leave the station to return to their unbound life and practice their heathenish ways. (KMZ 1899)

Things became progressively worse as the settlers forced Aboriginal people from their stations, particularly the aged, sick and infirm. This was to be the case Australia-wide as the missions increasingly became havens for the various groups of Aborigines forced to gather there as a result of the settlers’ pastoral expansion (Durack 1979:15; Reynolds 1981:155; Rowse 1998:7). Most Aboriginal people drawn to the missions shared common characteristics: a need for European food and goods, accommodation of the missionary demands as best it suited, preservation of their traditional movement patterns and retention of their ceremonial practices despite the active efforts of the missions to stamp these out. As summed up by Jones and Sutton (1986:37): ‘This co-existence of authorised and unauthorised behaviour, characteristic of most Australian mission stations, endured at Killalpaninna until its closure’.
Conclusions

In the annals of frontier interaction it is apparent that the disruption and most brutal treatment of Aboriginal people was in areas that had no strong missionary presence; areas such as mid-west Queensland, Cape York, the Gulf Country and Victoria River District come readily to the fore (Hercus 1990:157–158; Lewis 2012; Reynolds 1972; Roberts 1881, 2005; Rose 1991). Pearson (2014:24–27) provided a most, eloquent account of the value the Lutheran mission at Cape Bedford in Queensland, and particularly missionary George Schwartz, had in the survival of the Guugu Yimidhirr. This Christian safe haven was in stark contrast to much of the frontier without the missionary factor:

For the other side of Queensland’s frontier had been and still was a charnel house; consisting of moments when the pitiless logic of colonialism ended in genocidal doom for some groups.

This could well have been the case around Lakes Hope, Kopperamanna, Killalpaninna and Perigundi had Elder’s pastoral ambitions and the Dieri resistance taken their full course uninterrupted by the arrival of missionaries. The possible outcome for this was implied in the messages coming through from the station about having ‘good men’ and enough ‘guns and ammunition of the right sort’ would resolve the ‘native problem’ (Advertiser, 6 January 1866).

Without the mitigating influence of the Moravian and Lutheran missionaries the settlers’ actions would have possibly doomed the Dieri to a similar fate as the Yawarawarrka (Yawarrawarrka) in the nearby Innamincka/Coongie Lakes region of Cooper Creek. Hercus (1990:158) stated that the oral tradition of a large scale massacre of Karangura, Dieri, Yarluyandi and Ngamini along with Yawarawarrka (Yawarrawarrka) at Cooncherie waterhole has been vividly recalled for over a century.

Against this savage backdrop the missions proved to be a refuge in the sea of settler encroachment and police harassment for any Aboriginal people who interfered with the pastoralists’ economic interests. They also proved to be one of
the best places for procuring the material goods and food which Aboriginal people now needed and desired. It could be said that many Aboriginal people never became incorporated into the mission; rather the mission became a part of the Aboriginal way of life. Both on Cooper Creek and later in Central Australia, the Lutheran missions played a pivotal role, both good and bad, in how the many displaced Aboriginal groups could accommodate the pressures on their existence. This was a pattern that was repeated in many other parts of Australia and with other missionary groups. In most cases missions proved fundamental in preserving Aboriginal presence on and near their lands against the relentless tide of settler expansion that often had little time, understanding or patience in dealing with the impacts they generated on the traditional inhabitants.

The effect the missions had has often been portrayed in a negative sense as hastening the demise of Aboriginal culture and depriving groups of their land and future (Jones and Sutton 1986:38; Reynolds 1981; Stevens 1994). Stevens (1994:2–3) acknowledged the role the Killalpaninna Mission played in providing a refuge of physical safety for Aboriginal people, yet saw it as greatly facilitating their cultural disintegration, loss of spiritual foundations and the loss of their identity. Reynolds (1981:155–158) felt that the missionaries, more than any other group of Europeans in colonial Australia, mounted by far the most deliberate and consistent intellectual challenge to Aboriginal society. However, he acknowledged their role in providing sanctuary from the worst depredations of the European settlement and noted how Aboriginal people adapted to appease the missionaries, extract their prized goods, continue seasonal movement patterns and, for the most part, resist attempts to proselytise them (Reynolds 1981). Durack (1979:15), in her work on the history of the Kimberley missionary endeavor, took a more positive view, concluding that:

…it seems clear to me at the conclusion of my task that the work of the missionaries, sometimes inspired and sometimes blind, was the only evidence the Aborigines had of anything in the nature of consistent altruism within an otherwise ruthless and self seeking economy. It provided a ray of hope in the prevailing gloom of their predicament. It was for many their only means of survival and their sole reason for regeneration.
Pearson (2014:25) summed it up succinctly:

The attitudes of the churches towards indigenous cultures, languages and heritage—and the conviction and vigour with which they sought to deracinate their charges—varied widely, according to the proclivities of particular denominations, individual missions within denominations, the personalities of key missionary figures, and the period of history. Therefore, while many missions and government settlements destroyed indigenous cultures and languages, others actively preserved them, and unofficially (and later sometimes officially) allowed Christianity to coexist with native religious beliefs.

All these views have some relevance as to how the missionary presence was an important factor in the evolving pattern of frontier interaction between Aboriginal people and the European intruders on their ancestral lands. If the intellectual and spiritual destruction of existing Aboriginal cultures was a deliberate or inadvertent missionary aim, in most cases it only succeeded in part. In the case of the Lutheran missionary effort, first in Adelaide and surrounds, then in the far north at Cooper Creek, and lastly at Hermannsburg on the Finke River in Central Australia, their translations of the Kaurna, Ramindjeri, Barngarla, Dieri and Arrernte language was perhaps their most lasting legacy. These works created the foundations for a resurgence of these languages that are the cornerstone of cultural regeneration and preservation today.

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