

‘Down in the gully & just outside the garden walk’

White women and the sexual abuse of Aboriginal women on a colonial Australian frontier

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At the close of the nineteenth century, the accusation that three young white women had colluded in their uncle’s sexual exploitation of Aboriginal women in the northwest of Western Australia caused consternation for the authorities. Unlike the accusation of ‘immorality’ levelled at station-owner Walter Nairn, the charge of complicity against his three nieces is a rarity in the Australian colonial archive. The ensuing investigation in 1898 revolved around whether the white women’s alleged role was common talk in the local community and whether the Aboriginal women who lived and worked in the Nairn household slept in the bedrooms of the white women. It culminated in the unlikely finding that the white women in question were oblivious to what was going on ‘down in the gully & just outside the garden walk’. Tracing the story of this investigation provides an insight into the different expectations for women and men, both Indigenous and white, the gendered anxieties that attended the employment of Aboriginal women as domestic servants in white homes and the complex and negotiated relationships that existed on the sexual and domestic frontiers of Australian colonialism.

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In August 1898 an unusual and rather disturbing case was brought to the attention of the colonial authorities in Western Australia. Walter Nairn, a white settler who with his brother William owned and ran a sheep station in the Murchison district, in the mid-west of the colony, had been accused of detaining two women for ‘immoral purposes’¹ – aided and abetted by

¹ Police Inspector Lawrence to PC S Logan, 25 August 1898; 373/1898 Cons 255, Western Australia Aborigines Department Files 1898–1908, State Records Office of Western

his three nieces. Constable Logan charged that Nairn had been keeping 'Aboriginal native' Caroline prisoner since she gave birth to his child some three years earlier:

On several occasions she has attempted to run away into the bush, but William Nairn's daughters, who watch her on behalf of the Uncle, send the Ab natives after her, and she is brought back before she can get many yards away. William Nairn's three daughters take Caroline into their bedroom every night where she sleeps on the floor, the door of the room being bolted, so that Caroline may be kept wholly and solely for the Uncle's pleasure.²

Caroline and another woman, Polly, had allegedly been 'assigned' to work for Walter Nairn by his brother William, who wielded a 'dog chain' to force Caroline into signing her contracts. Polly, also, was 'virtually a prisoner', held by Walter Nairn 'to satisfy his own lusts'. While Caroline complained sadly that she wished she 'were an old woman ... so that she could bush walk, and no one would want to fetch her back', Polly 'continuously' ran away, the police bringing her back three times. 'Numbers of young Aboriginal native boys want these women, and they are just as anxious to go with them, but are cruelly and unjustly prevented by William Nairn, Protector of Aborigines, and his brother Walter Nairn', Logan's report concluded.³

The accusation levelled at the three white women, Walter Nairn's nieces, that they colluded in the sexual exploitation of Aboriginal women, was an unusual one.⁴ It was this aspect of Logan's report that drew the attention

Australia, microfilm 4124, University of Newcastle, Callaghan, NSW. All further archival references from this source, unless otherwise stated. All spelling and punctuation as in the original.

² Report of S Logan, 1 August 1898.

³ Ibid.

⁴ I have found only one other comparable charge, in a Queensland file dating back to 1900. In this case, it involved the daughter of a white man who was found to be enslaving and mistreating his Aboriginal workers, infecting two Aboriginal women with venereal disease, as well as fathering two children by them and 'using' a half-caste girl since she was 12. When the police came to remove the Aboriginal workers and their children in 1903, the daughter 'offered violent opposition' and, together with her brother, 'forcibly dragged the halfcastes and three of the fullblooded women away to the house and locked them in.' According to the Chief Protector Meston, the 'women speak of her in very bitter terms'. This account was contested by the Northern Protector, Walter Roth, who declared that the daughter 'is a good woman'. It is worth noting that the daughter, a single woman aged about 35, made her living selling oysters gathered by the Aboriginal women and was thus dependent on their (non-domestic) labour: A Meston to Under Secretary, Home Office, September 11, 1902; W Roth to Under Secretary, Home Department, received July 24, 1902; Extract from Report by A Meston, Protector of Aborigines, 7 July, 1902: Item ID 717006, The Keppel Islanders, 4356 Health & Home Affairs/Education Department Batch Files, Queensland State Archives.

of the Chief Protector of Aborigines⁵ and, as the evidence of the ensuing investigation revealed, was a particularly vexatious claim in the eyes of the local whites. At a time when official anxieties about interracial sex and miscegenation were heightened but legislation to prevent them was yet to appear, the question of whether or not Walter Nairn had forced sexual relations with the Aboriginal women he employed would become less urgent than whether he had been helped in doing so by his brother's daughters.

Thus the Nairn file provides an entry point for a discussion not only about interracial sex on Australian frontiers and the position of Aboriginal women, but also about the role of white women in that history. Further, it allows us to consider the significance for the colonial project of a particular construction of white womanhood as chaste, morally irreproachable and above all innocent of any knowledge of interracial sex. The investigation, revolving around the local community's knowledge of the white women's alleged role and the sleeping arrangements of the Nairn household, showed how important it was to refute any suggestion to the contrary.

Historical work on interracial sex between Aboriginal women and white men on Australian frontiers, centring on questions of agency and power, has had little to say about the part played by white women in this history.⁶ Where the Nairn case has surfaced before, the historian Su-Jane Hunt drew upon it to discuss the history of Aboriginal sexual exploitation, but did not mention the Nairn women at all.⁷ Important studies have highlighted the activities of outspoken women activists in protesting against white men's sexual exploitation of Aboriginal women, but this work privileges the perspective of individual missionaries and urban reformers and makes little reference to the experiences and

⁵ Memo, Prinsep to the Premier, 23 August 1898.

⁶ See Ann McGrath *'Born in the Cattle': Aborigines in Cattle Country*, Sydney: Allen & Unwin 1987, 72–74; see also Raymond Evans "'Don't you remember Black Alice, Sam Holt?': Aboriginal Women in Queensland History", [1982], in Raymond Evans *Fighting Words: Writing About Race*, St Lucia: UQP1999, 201–214; Deborah Bird Rose *Hidden Histories: Black Stories from Victoria River Downs, Humbert River and Wave Hill Stations*, Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press 1991, 179–188; Ann McGrath "'Black Velvet": Aboriginal women and their relations with white men in the Northern Territory, 1910–40', in Kay Daniels (ed) *So Much Hard Work: Women and Prostitution in Australian History*, Sydney: Fontana/Collins 1984, 233–297; Hannah Robert 'Disciplining the female Aboriginal body: interracial sex and the pretence of separation', *Australian Feminist Studies* 16 (34), 2001, 69–81.

⁷ Su-Jane Hunt 'Aboriginal women and colonial authority: Northwestern Australia 1885–1905', in Judy Mackinoly and Heather Radi (eds) *In Pursuit of Justice: Australian Women and the Law 1788–1979*, Sydney: Hale & Iremonger 1979, 38–39; Susan Jane Hunt *Spinifex and Hessian: Women's Lives in North-Western Australia 1860–1900*, Nedlands: University of Western Australia Press 1986, 106–107.

attitudes of the broader group of white women who partnered white men on pastoral frontiers.⁸ The attitudes of these particular women to Aboriginal women, in turn, have been the subject of a body of historical scholarship that has tended to show the constraints upon interracial female relations imposed by the structures of colonisation. Frontier women's complicity and collusion in the sexual exploitation of Aboriginal women, let alone their active involvement as procurers, has barely been considered.⁹

The excesses of white men, whose sexual relations with Aboriginal women (and children) on the frontier ranged from de facto marriage and concubinage, through casual sex and prostitution, to sadistic, violent rape, recall the opportunities available to white men in imperial and colonial contexts generally, just as their documentation in the official archive reflects the anxieties generated by such unrestrained and dangerous sexuality. A notorious kind of systemisation emerged as white men were enticed to work on pastoral stations across northern Australia by the promise of a ready supply of Aboriginal 'stud' women maintained on the stations for their use, with different classes of women allotted to different workers according to rank.¹⁰ Former Kimberley drover Matt Savage recalled that the station managers and head stockmen jealously guarded the Aboriginal women from itinerant white men who were not on the payroll, the 'combos' or 'gin-burglars'. The practice was known as 'gin shepherding', Savage explained.¹¹ When the same term was applied to

⁸ Marilyn Lake 'Frontier feminism and the marauding white man', *Journal of Australian Studies* 49, 1996, 12–20. See also Fiona Paisley *Loving Protection? Australian Feminism and Aboriginal Women's Rights 1919–1939*, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press 2000; Alison Holland 'Wives and mothers like ourselves: exploring white women's intervention in the politics of race, 1920s–1940s', *Australian Historical Studies* 32 (117), 2001, 292–310; Alison Holland 'The campaign for women protectors: gender, race and frontier between the wars', *Australian Feminist Studies* 16 (34), 2001, 27–42.

⁹ Elizabeth West 'White women in colonial Australia', *Refractory Girl*, 13–14, March 1977, 54–60; Judith Godden 'A new look at the pioneer woman', *Hecate* 5 (2), 1979, 6–21; Myrna Tonkinson 'Sisterhood or Aboriginal servitude? Black women and white women on the Australian frontier', *Aboriginal History* 12 (1), 1988, 27–39; Lyn Riddett 'Watch the white women fade: Aboriginal and white women in the Northern Territory 1870–1940', *Hecate* 10 (1), 1992, 73–92; Margaret Allen 'The brothers up north and the sisters down south: the Mackay family and the frontier', *Hecate* 27 (2), 2001, 7–31.

¹⁰ Ann McGrath 'Aboriginal women workers in the N.T., 1911–1939', *Hecate* 4 (2), 1978, 16–17; Evans 'Don't you remember Black Alice', 208–209; McGrath 'Black Velvet', 256–257; McGrath *Born in the Cattle*, 79–80; Bill Rosser *Dreamtime Nightmares: Biographies of Aborigines under the Queensland Aborigines Act*, Ringwood: Penguin, 1985, 31. A similar practice was reported in Victoria's Western District in the early 1850s: Margaret Kiddle *Men of Yesterday: A Social History of the Western District of Victoria 1834–1890*, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press 1962, 122; and Jan Critchett *A Distant Field of Murder: Western District Frontiers 1834–1848*, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press 1990, 37.

¹¹ Keith Willey *Boss Drover*, Adelaide: Rigby Limited 1971, 46.

the white station wives who kept Aboriginal women 'locked up' and out of reach of white men, the assumption has been that they were, thereby, preventing access to these women by their husbands and their husbands' employees. But this assumption is supported by little in the way of actual evidence. Instead it reveals the strength of social taboos surrounding the representation of white women and their relationships with Aboriginal women.¹²

The 'sexual jealousy' thesis – that white women living and raising families in the contact zone¹³ viewed Aboriginal women primarily as threatening sexual rivals and competitors for white men's attentions – was articulated by feminist historian Miriam Dixson in 1975, although it is safe to say it had been long entrenched in popular belief by then.¹⁴ This representation of white women has had a certain influence in revisionist scholarship challenging equally entrenched representations of 'pioneer' women as kindly, caring guardians of Aboriginal women. Either way, the notion that white women were opposed to the sexual exploitation of Aboriginal women remains intact.¹⁵ Rare is the suggestion, even, that settler white women might have deliberately ignored the sexual usage of Aboriginal women by white men to protect 'their' men, as much as themselves, from uncomfortable truths about the paternity of mixed-descent children.¹⁶ Certainly no historian has yet gone as far as Constable

¹² Riddett 'Watch the white women fade', 85; see also L A Riddett *Kine, Kin and Country: The Victoria River District of the Northern Territory 1911–1966*, Canberra: ANU North Australia Research Unit Monograph 1990, 115–116.

¹³ Mary Louise Pratt *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, London: Routledge 1992, 6.

¹⁴ Miriam Dixson *The Real Matilda: Women and Identity in Australia, 1788 to 1975*, Harmondsworth: Penguin 1976, 197–198. Earlier expressions of the 'sexual jealousy' thesis can be read in the various cartoons representing dismayed white women confronted with Aboriginal mistresses that appeared from the turn of the twentieth century (for instance, Percy Spence, 'The Black Predecessor', *The Bulletin*, 24 February 1894) and the literary works of writers Katharine Susannah Prichard (the novel *Coonardoo*, London: Cape 1929 and the play *Brumby Innes* presented the year earlier, and published by Paterson in 1928), Xavier Herbert (*Capricornia*, London: Angus & Robertson 1938) and Tom Ronan (*Vision Splendid*, London: Cassell & Co 1954); as well as the recollections of Kimberley drover Matt Savage, recorded in the 1960s, see Willey *Boss Drover*, 19.

¹⁵ See Pat O'Shane 'Is there any relevance in the women's movement for Aboriginal women?' *Refractory Girl*, September 1976, 32; West 'White women in colonial Australia', 55; McGrath 'Born in the Cattle', 72–74; Riddett 'Watch the white women fade', 73–74, 84–85; Patricia Grimshaw, Marilyn Lake, Ann McGrath and Marian Quartly *Creating a Nation*, Ringwood: McPhee Gribble 1994, 144–145.

¹⁶ Bobbi Sykes 'Black women in Australia: a history', in Jan Mercer (ed) *The Other Half: Women in Australian Society*, Harmondsworth: Penguin 1975, 321; see also Kat Ellinghaus 'Racism in the Never-Never: disparate readings of Jeannie Gunn', *Hecate* 23 (2), 1997, 85–86; and Jan Larbalestier 'Amity and kindness in the Never-Never: ideology and Aboriginal-European relationships in the Northern Territory', *Social Analysis* 27, April

Logan did, and argued that white women actually captured and patrolled Aboriginal women for the use of their men.

Historians have instead alluded to white women's procuring and guarding of Aboriginal women for household, as opposed to sexual, labour. It has been argued that white women heightened racial conflict on the frontier in this way, and that their often 'brutal' treatment of black female workers further exacerbated racial tensions.¹⁷ The resentment engendered by white women's exploitation of Aboriginal women's domestic labour was certainly enduring.¹⁸ Yet the position of the Aboriginal servant could, and often did, simultaneously entail sexual abuse as well as outright sexual slavery. Such female-upon-female captivities might be better understood within a wider analytic framework that considers the colonial circulation of Aboriginal women and children as simultaneously domestic and sexual commodities.¹⁹ In this context, the possibility that white women could have functioned as warders and traffickers must also be considered.

In raising this possibility for discussion, we must be wary of reviving a deeply embedded anti-feminist impulse to scapegoat women for sexual abuses and exploitation perpetuated by men.²⁰ At the same time it is crucial to recognise the nuances and complexities of gender and race re-

1990, 75, 78. There is much evidence of such domestic enslavement of Aboriginal women by white women: see, for example, the story of a Mrs McAlpin and captive 'Kitty' at Bulga: 'Some Rambling Remarks on the Life and History of James Swales-Clark and his wife, Elizabeth McDonald', typed manuscript, dated 9 September 1914, hand written note indicating written by his daughter Elizabeth for her niece, copy held Newcastle Cultural Collection, University of Newcastle, Percy Haslam collection, Cond B Laut, February 2001, 35–36; and Anthony Trollope's 1873 description of 'a lady' who kept a young Aboriginal girl as a virtual slave: Hume Dow (ed) *Trollope's Australia: A Selection from the Australian Passages in Australia and New Zealand by Anthony Trollope*, Melbourne: Thomas Nelson 1966, 135–136; see also Shirleene Robinson *Something Like Slavery? Queensland's Aboriginal Child Workers, 1842–1945*, Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing 2008, 68–83; Henry Reynolds *With the White People: The Crucial Role of Aborigines in the Exploration and Development of Australia*, Ringwood: Penguin 1990, 165–176.

17 Godden 'A new look at the pioneer woman', 18–19; West 'White women in colonial Australia', 56–57.

18 See Tonkinson 'Sisterhood or Aboriginal servitude?', 37–38; and Jackie Huggins, Jo Willmot, Isabel Tarrago, Kathy Willetts, Liz Bond, Lillian Holt, Eleanor Bourke, Maryann Bin-Salik, Pat Fowell, Joann Schmider, Valerie Craigie and Linda McBride-Levi 'Letter to the Editors', *Women's Studies International Forum* 1 (5), 1991, 506.

19 For such a suggestive framework see Katrina Schlunke 'Incommensurate suffering: 'making' women and children in massacre', *Australian Feminist Studies* 16 (34), 2001, 61–67.

20 See Victoria Haskins "'Fear the bitch who sheds no tears': the cultural depiction of the white female scapegoat in Australian historical drama", *Lilith* 12, 2003, 50–64. This misogynist construction has been, as Joan Sangster's work in Canada has shown, particularly predominant when it comes to incest: Joan Sangster *Regulating Girls and Women: Sexuality, Family, and the Law in Ontario, 1920–1960*, Toronto: Oxford University Press 2001, 41–44. It would be a further insult to impose such prejudice

lations on Australian colonial frontiers. In a situation where white women's economic, political and social independence was severely curtailed, contraception uncertain and pregnancy and childbirth hazardous, women's sexual power, such as it was, resided in their ability to withhold their favours and dampen male desire, not their ability to inflame male passions. However much white colonial women may have resented and feared the supposedly 'sexually available' colonised woman, it is not likely that they envied their attraction for white men. In fact, it was arguably in their interest to emphasise their distinction from the hyper-sexualised black woman. The romanticisation of 'pioneer women' as virtuous paragons obscures the fact that their origins could be as rough and working-class as any of the white men of the frontier. They were thus vulnerable to sexual abuse themselves if they did not secure their distance from women more 'available' still – colonised native women.²¹ As a historian of the Western District of Victoria observed, even as 'likely' white women on colonial frontiers risked being the objects of intense 'solicitation' from white men, Aboriginal women 'bore this part of the brunt of pioneering'.²²

Moreover, there was little that white women living in frontier households could do to protect Aboriginal women from abuse and exploitation. Other than reporting white men to the police – a dramatic step that risked their own social and economic security, regardless of whether it would lead to a successful prosecution – their only recourse was to withhold sex themselves, as did Western District squatter's wife Annie Dawbin, for example.²³ Not a particularly effective response, it might be argued, at least not for the Aboriginal women. Little wonder, then, that as white women living on the frontier 'matured', they came to view such sexual relations with equanimity.²⁴ For some white women, it must have occurred to them that Aboriginal women were, in fact, deflecting unwanted and even dangerous male advances from themselves.

Yet major social taboos precluded overt acknowledgment of this reality. Through 'enactments of social blindness' to native sexuality, historian Penny Russell has pointed out, white women demonstrated 'moral virtue,

upon relationships between white and Aboriginal women, given the deeply problematic depiction of white women as maternal figures towards child-like Indigenous women: see O'Shane 'Is there any relevance in the women's movement?', 31–34.

²¹ See the recollections of Mrs McCaugh, in Geoffrey Blomfield *Baal Belbora: The End of the Dreaming*, Sydney: Alternative Publishing Co-operative 1981, 42; also Willey Boss Drover, 19.

²² Kiddle *Men of Yesterday*, 119.

²³ Critchett *A Distant Field of Murder*, 138.

²⁴ Riddett *Kine, Kin and Country*, 116; see also an account in Haskins *One Bright Spot*, 136–137.

impeccable social conduct and – implicitly – rank'.²⁵ It was Annie Dawbin, not her husband, who was 'humiliated' and threatened by the public exposure of his liaison with an Aboriginal woman. White women were not only expected to turn a blind eye to the rampant sexual exploitation of Indigenous women. Their precarious status as respectable women – suitable wives for white men – depended upon it being understood that they were sheltered by the men around them from any knowledge of interracial sex (and the mortification that accompanied such knowledge). Explosively, the allegations made by Constable Logan challenged this critical taboo. While the Nairn case and its investigation must be read cautiously as a historical source, it brings into focus many of the contradictions and inconsistencies that run through the history of white women and interracial sex on the frontier.

The Nairn investigation

The investigation into the Nairns' treatment of Aboriginal women took place in the window between the Western Australian colonial government's belated assumption of the control of native affairs from London in April 1898 and the introduction of legislation outlawing 'cohabitation' between white men and Aboriginal women on the frontier in 1905. Henry Prinsep had been the colony's first Chief Protector for only a few months when Logan's charge landed on his desk; the Premier John Forrest advised him that, while the report was probably 'exaggerated', he should have the police investigate further.²⁶

Although interracial sex was not yet illegal anywhere in the Australian colonies, the new administration was undoubtedly wary on the subject of the sexual enslavement of Aboriginal women by white pastoralists, particularly when an official Protector was allegedly involved. The pastoralists' maltreatment of Aborigines in the region had been given public prominence by the missionary John Gribble in the mid-1880s. Gribble had exposed, among other things, the way in which white men treated their 'assigned' Aboriginal female workers as sex slaves.²⁷ The British government had consequently refused to cede control of Aboriginal affairs when Western Australia was granted self-government in 1890. On the

²⁵ Penny Russell 'Cultures of distinction', in Hsu-Ming Teo and Richard White (eds) *Cultural History in Australia*, Sydney: UNSW Press 2003, 170.

²⁶ Memo, Forrest to Chief Protector, 23 August 1898.

²⁷ Penelope Hetherington *Settlers, Servants & Slaves: Aboriginal and European Children in Nineteenth-Century Western Australia*, Crawley: UWA Press 2002, 167.

abolition of the British colonial Aborigines Protection Board, replaced by Forrest's appointment of Prinsep in 1898, the humanitarians renewed their protests. With Federation on the horizon, the question was raised whether Western Australia really was fit to manage its own Aboriginal affairs or whether this responsibility should go to a federal government.²⁸ We may be sure that the Premier's impulse to have Logan's claims investigated was 'political' in the most direct sense of the word, at a time when the legitimacy of the new office of Chief Protector and its ability to exercise the kind of authority needed to manage the colonial project was a matter of contention.

A Senior Constable Ritchie from Wyndham, further north, was directed to investigate Logan's accusations. Logan had complained that the Nairn brothers had prevented him from interviewing the Aboriginal women involved and would not let him see them alone.²⁹ Constable Ritchie had no such complaints. Arriving at Byro station in the middle of November 1898, he was initially told by William Nairn that his brother was away in Perth and that interviews with Aboriginal people would be difficult as 'a great many of the natives had run away'. However, William Nairn soon changed his stance, becoming cooperative and indeed of great practical assistance to the investigation. William Nairn travelled with Ritchie in the bush to locate various key individuals (including Polly, or Murriss, her Aboriginal name, who apparently was among the 'runaways') and introduced Ritchie to his white neighbours. Ritchie was able to take statements not only from Caroline (Aboriginal name Mowaremarra) and Polly, but also from Mary Ann (Williambury), a third Aboriginal woman who worked at the Nairn household. He also interviewed four Aboriginal men and six white men who lived locally. Ritchie was not able to interview Walter Nairn, of course, but William agreed to provide a statement. Throughout all the interviews, William Nairn made a point of being present.³⁰

The problems with Ritchie's 'evidence' are obvious. Not only were the statements taken from the Aboriginal interviewees all made in the presence of their 'Boss' (as they consistently referred to William Nairn), but the form in which the statements appear indicates that Ritchie actually wrote them up later in batches from other, misplaced originals. The potential for misinterpretation, omission and fabrication

²⁸ See Peter Biskup *Not Slaves, Not Citizens: The Aboriginal Problem in Western Australia, 1898-1934*, St Lucia: UQP 1973, 25-28, 45-46, 55-65; also Elizabeth Goddard and Tom Stannage 'John Forrest and the Aborigines', *Studies in Western Australian History* 8, December 1984, 52-58.

²⁹ Memo, S Logan to Inspector Lawrence, 9 September 1898.

³⁰ Report of PC Ritchie, 28 November 1898. Hereafter 'Ritchie Report'.

was considerable. Similar reservations need to be held in mind for the white statements, again given in the presence of William Nairn, and more often than not scribed by Ritchie, although mostly signed by the speaker himself. If the white respondents were not likely to have been quite as intimidated by William Nairn's presence as were his Aboriginal employees, they still had to be aware of their statements' impact on their relationship with their neighbours. Finally, all the statements were later carefully re-transcribed and sent to Walter Nairn for his comment after the investigation. Those interviewed may not have known that this would happen,³¹ but they might have suspected it was a possibility. All of these factors make Ritchie's collection of statements a less than reliable source.

Ritchie himself felt it necessary to defend the reliability of the statements he had collected from the Aboriginal interviewees. Contesting Logan's assertion that 'it would only be a farce asking any questions in the presence of the members of the Byro station as the native will say the reverse to what she means', Ritchie argued that Aboriginal responses to police enquiries had to be regarded with scepticism in any case. He declared that 'for a policeman asking a native questions either before his master or not, he will receive more than the truth, so that it behoves a man to be very careful with them when taking statements or complaints.'³² By implying that Logan was naïve in countenancing complaints taken from Aboriginal people in the absence of their 'masters', Ritchie evaded the awkward fact that he had been unable to refuse William Nairn's demand to be present throughout the investigation – the very obstacle that Logan and his superior, Inspector Lawrence, had originally sought to overcome in the interests of obtaining a 'thorough investigation into the matter'.³³

As it turned out, however, the Aboriginal statements were remarkably consistent in averring that, yes indeed, Walter Nairn had engaged on various occasions in sexual relations with both Caroline and Polly; and furthermore he had fathered a child to Caroline, five-year-old Ruby, and might very well be the father of the baby that Caroline now carried 'in the belly' and which

³¹ Nairn had demanded to see the investigation reports for himself when he returned to the station and they were duly despatched to him by direction of the Premier in March 1899: Memos, Prinsep to the Premier, 30 December 1898; Forrest to Secretary to the Premier, 27 February 1899; Vernon to Chief Protector, 27 February 1899; draft letter, Prinsep to Nairn, nd, c. 27 February 1899; Nairn to Prinsep, 4 April 1899; 373/1898. Walter Nairn for his part suspected that he had been provided with extracts only but it appears that he was indeed given the whole of the statements taken by Ritchie and his summary.

³² Ritchie Report.

³³ Memo, Lawrence to Prinsep, 8 October 1898. Note that Ritchie took pains to say that he had actually requested that William Nairn be present: Ritchie Report.

she herself considered to be Walter's child.³⁴ While none of the Aboriginal people reported actually seeing Walter and Caroline 'cohabiting',³⁵ Polly, Mary Ann, Banjoe (Niabatteroo) and Cockatoo (Wanmoor) all stated that they had seen the couple's tracks together and the place where they had lain together on the ground. Mary Ann's statement was both evocative and representative: 'I have seen both Caroline and Walters tracks in the garden and across the gully, together, I have seen where they have laid down'.³⁶ As to the claim that Walter and Polly engaged in sexual intercourse, Mary Ann and Banjoe had heard from the other Aboriginal people and Polly herself that they did, although they had not seen the couple together themselves.³⁷ But Tommy (Mejarra) claimed to have seen them together, 'once at Belang Pool and again at the well inside the house paddock, close to the house',³⁸ and Caroline had said, very firmly, that she had seen Walter 'sleep with Polly outside this house one night. He gave Polly a new ring, and slept with her. I am sure of this. I saw it with my own eyes. Polly did not tell me'.³⁹ Polly was not at all reticent in her interview with Ritchie:

All the whites on the station used to cohabit with me. I was not particular. Walter Nairn has me the same as anyone else. He never kept me for his own use. I used to go all over the run. This is my country, living with black and white men.⁴⁰

Even the white statements acknowledged that Walter Nairn's relationship with Caroline, if not Polly, and the paternity of her daughter were 'common talk amongst the natives'. While no white man would confirm that they personally knew Nairn to have had sexual relations with either Caroline or Polly, neither was there anything significant in their statements to suggest that they would not believe it of him (only one, the manager of a neighbouring station, Geoff Davis, even said as much).⁴¹

³⁴ Statement of Caroline/Mowaremarra, 17 November 1898; Statement of Mary Ann/Williambury, 17 November 1898; Statement of Polly/Murris, 19 November 1898; Statement of Banjo/Niabatteroo, 19 November 1898; Statement of Cockatoo/Wanmoor, 22 November 1898; Statement of Tommy/Mejarra, 22 November 1898; 373/1898.

³⁵ The repetitive and awkward use of this term throughout the statements of both Aboriginal and white respondents is jarring. However it should be noted that the euphemistic term 'cohabiting' for the interracial sexual act was being used even in the 1840s: see Parker's Report quoted in Critchett *A Distant Field of Murder*, 136.

³⁶ Statement of Mary Ann/Williambury.

³⁷ Statement of Mary Ann/Williambury; Statement of Banjo/Niabatteroo.

³⁸ Statement of Tommy/Mejarra.

³⁹ Statement of Caroline/Mowaremarra.

⁴⁰ Statement of Polly/Murris.

⁴¹ Statement of M D Rowan, 19 November 1898; Statement of Isaac Tyson, 21 November 1898; Statement of John Tyson, 11 November 1898; Statement of Geoff Davis, 24

Responding to Caroline's transcribed statement later, Walter went into an elaborate explanation of the paternity of her four babies, three of whom had either died in infancy or were stillborn. His explanation generally tallied with Caroline's own account, including that her first born had been fathered by the son of one of Walter's sisters. But Walter denied fathering the child she bore during the time of the investigation and had since delivered, and on the subject of the little mixed-descent girl, Ruby, declared that this was 'the first occasion that I know of Caroline saying the child was mine – I have sometimes heard her deny it was mine'. Rather vaguely, Walter said that he thought Ruby's father might have been a tutor employed on the station for his brother's children (dismissed the previous year, some five years after the child's birth, for 'misbehaviour with the black women'). The 'misconception' among the Aborigines that the child was his, Walter explained, had arisen from his kindness in supplying milk arrowroot to the infant: Caroline's Aboriginal husband, Dandy, had said

that he considered I saved the child's life, from the care I bestowed upon it at this time the child came to be called mine, I never contradicted the rumour when I heard the natives calling it my child, hence the fiction started, and to this day all the station natives call her my child.⁴²

Walter's defence against the multiple statements from the Aboriginal respondents regarding his tracks alongside Caroline's was revealing of the sexual tension and indeed rivalry that existed on the station. Declaring that he had known some of the Aboriginal men to 'lay in wait' for the Aboriginal women when they went to get water from the well in the evenings, Walter suggested perhaps these men had been wearing his old boots, and that the Aboriginal people interviewed should have been asked if the tracks they saw 'were booted or barefooted'. He did not deny having had sexual relations with Caroline, but he did declare, in an injured and righteous tone, that Caroline's 'story of seeing me sleeping outside this house with the woman Polly, I declare to be false, neither here nor elsewhere did she ever see me sleeping with Polly'. Walter dismissed Polly's statement that she had had sex with him – Polly was 'a common prostitute and she admits it' – but he was clearly angered by

November 1898; Statement of A Daly, 25 November 1898; Statement of Frederick Henry Caesar, 25 November 1898; Statement of H B Walsh, 1 December 1898; Statement of PC A Pollett, 28 November 1898; Statement of W (William) J Nairn, 23 November 1898.

⁴² Remarks by Walter J Nairn on extracts of evidence, 17 January 1899. Hereafter 'Walter Nairn Remarks'.

Tommy's statement that he had also seen him with Polly, declaring that Tommy was 'the most untrustworthy native on the station, and at the time he gave evidence was under arrest for grossly illtreating another old native, and he had recently absconded from our service ... I have never cohabitated with this woman Polly.'⁴³

Walter Nairn's responses, of course, must be treated sceptically; yet his accounts are in some ways the most useful to the historian. His remarks and explanations exposed rather more than he presumably intended about the situation that prevailed at the Byro station homestead, and certainly more than his brother William had in his statement to Ritchie. Walter's intensely personal knowledge of the Aboriginal people at Byro reveals the complex web of interrelationships that made up the pastoral frontier, unmasking the 'pretence of separation' upon which racial supremacy and colonial domination was premised.⁴⁴

Ritchie was prepared to accept that Walter Nairn may well have engaged in sexual relations with Caroline and Polly. 'There may be something in it,' he reported: 'anyhow if such is the case, I do not think that Walter Nairn has been any worse, than a great many others, not only on the Murchison but all over the colony'.⁴⁵ And therein lies the reason, perhaps, for the otherwise remarkable frankness of the Aboriginal statements and the non-committal tone of the white.

The question of the degree of coercion involved in Caroline and Polly's position in the Nairn household was dismissed by Ritchie, who concluded that Caroline had been given the choice to live at the camp 'altogether' or the house and had chosen the latter 'of her own free will'; and that Polly was not kept at the station at all.⁴⁶ It transpired that Walter, not William, was the official 'Protector' and that neither Caroline nor Polly had ever been 'signed' by William (though Polly had in fact been assigned to William by Walter). The claim that Caroline was beaten with a dog chain was denied by all, including Caroline,⁴⁷ and although both she and Polly talked of having left the Nairn household on various occasions they framed their actions as having been 'taken away' by 'blackfellows', against their own will.⁴⁸

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Robert 'Disciplining the female Aboriginal body', 69–81.

⁴⁵ Ritchie Report.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Statement of Polly/Murris; Statement of Caroline/Mowaremarra; Statement of W (William) J Nairn.

⁴⁸ Statement of Polly/Murris; Statement of Caroline/Mowaremarra.

Ritchie's investigation did disclose that there had been an episode the year before, in which Caroline and Polly had left Byro station with 'Policeman Jimmy', an Aboriginal man and Polly's partner at the time. Caroline returned to the Nairn household a week later, but Polly had been pursued and captured by police, and sentenced to a period in gaol (after which she returned to Byro). Ritchie questioned the policeman and the magistrate, as well as William Nairn, and all were emphatic that Polly had not been gaoled for running away, but for stealing a dress.⁴⁹ This was, however, very likely to have been the clothing Polly was given to wear while working in the house, so she had in effect been penalised for running away.⁵⁰ What role Caroline played in the saga, or why she had left the house with Polly and her partner, was unclear.

Caroline also stated that she had run away once from Mrs Nairn, but had been 'caught' in the gully below the garden and brought back by Mrs Nairn's daughters. She explained that she ran away because her mistress was going to 'beat' her for some unnamed wrongdoing, but was emphatic that she had always wanted to stay at the Nairn house:

I have never asked to go to the bush and I don't want to go even now. I don't like the bush. I want to stop at the house ... I have never asked the boss to let me go to sleep at the native camp. I have never asked the boss to let me go to the bush. I don't want to live with a blackfellow, I would sooner stop at the house ... I never told any blackfellows that I did not want to stop at this station.⁵¹

William Nairn told Ritchie that, in fact, 'the only punishment we can put on her [Caroline] is to threaten to send her there [to the bush]'. The fact that the Nairns had had her in their household since she was about nine years of age was not factored in as a compulsion.⁵²

According to three of the Aboriginal statements, Caroline had once tried to go to live with the man Cockatoo, but their romance was thwarted by the Nairns.⁵³ Walter declared, disbelievingly, that 'it is the first time I have heard of it',⁵⁴ but Walter was probably being

⁴⁹ Statement of W (William) J Nairn; Statement of PC A Pollett; Statement of H B Walsh.

⁵⁰ For an example of the standard practice of issuing Aboriginal housemaids with clothing they had to leave at the house when they went back to camp, see Susanna De Vries *Great Pioneer Women of the Outback*, Sydney: Harper Collins 2005, 122–123; also Mrs Alan MacPherson *My Experiences in Australia: Being Recollections of a Visit to the Australian Colonies in 1856–57. By a Lady*, London: J F Hope 1860, 230–231.

⁵¹ Statement of Caroline/Mowaremarra.

⁵² Statement of W (William) J Nairn.

⁵³ Statement of Polly/Murris; Statement of Tommy/Mejarra; Statement of Cockatoo/Wanmoor.

⁵⁴ Walter Nairn Remarks.

disingenuous. Caroline, Walter claimed, had been 'given' at puberty by her late father to an Aboriginal man named Dandy, who also worked for the Nairns. However, it seems that Caroline had only ever lived with Dandy 'and his woman' for one period, of about four months. This was when Mrs Nairn was away and Caroline's daughter Ruby was newborn (the time when Walter claimed he had food sent out to their camp for the infant).⁵⁵ In 1896 Dandy and his wife departed, leaving Caroline behind with the Nairns. Dandy was still away from the station at the time of Ritchie's visit two years later, but had returned, according to Walter, by the time he responded to the evidence taken by Ritchie. Had 'we allowed Caroline to go to the native camp' to live with Cockatoo while Dandy was away from the station working, Walter wrote, 'there would have been a serious quarrel on Dandy's return'.⁵⁶ Dandy may have been taking the role of official husband, to ensure that Walter's access to Caroline was uncomplicated by claims of rival suitors.⁵⁷

The Nairn investigation highlights the intense sexual contest between men, white and Aboriginal, that dominated Australian frontiers. Walter's scornful remark that if all purported rights of Aboriginal men to women on adjoining stations were connected, 'there would be found a dozen claimants for every young native woman',⁵⁸ only points further to the way that access to Aboriginal women's bodies was bitterly fought over. If the authorities were cognisant, however, of how such tensions could be the catalyst for serious attacks upon white settlers,⁵⁹ they did not seem particularly perturbed. Rather, it was the claim that white women were aware of and colluding in the 'cohabitation' of white men and Aboriginal women that seemed to be the most distressing charge made by Logan, and the one that required refuting.

⁵⁵ Walter implied that Caroline had lived with Dandy on several occasions – 'whenever Mrs Nairn and family have left the station' – but others were clear that it was only the 'once': Walter Nairn Remarks; Statement of W (William) J Nairn; Statement of Mary Ann/Williambury; Statement of Banjo/Niabatteroo.

⁵⁶ Walter Nairn Remarks.

⁵⁷ Deborah Bird Rose has addressed the very difficult position for Aboriginal husbands and fathers confronted with white men's sexual demands for Aboriginal women, observing that those who cooperated gained some security and advantages: Rose *Hidden Histories*, 183.

⁵⁸ Walter Nairn Remarks.

⁵⁹ There are countless examples in the historical record. The most well-known episode of this nature is probably the Hornet Bank massacre in 1857 (see Gordon Reid *A Nest of Hornets: The Massacre of the Fraser Family at Hornet Bank Station, Central Queensland, 1857, and Related Events*, Melbourne: Oxford University Press 1982), and the infamous Forrest River massacre in the 1920s, which was preceded by the spearing of a white settler for raping a young Aboriginal girl and attempting to abduct her: Neville Green *The Forrest River Massacres*, South Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1995, 157, see also 69–70.

‘Strange things do occur in the back country’

Prinsep had sounded just a little shocked when he forwarded Logan’s statement to the Premier. ‘The report of the actions of W Nairn’s daughters is hard to believe’, he had written, ‘tho strange things do occur in the back country’.⁶⁰ His tone was amplified in the statements taken from the various white men by Ritchie, when he asked whether they knew of the Nairn girls ‘watching’ Caroline on behalf of their uncle. In marked contrast to their lukewarm reactions to the charges against Walter, the white interviewees were passionate in defence of the young women’s character. The Nairn girls were almost unanimously declared to be ‘very decent’ and ‘very respectable’, and the accusation against them ‘false’, ‘disgraceful and untrue’, ‘most disgraceful and disgusting’, ‘scandalous’ and ‘a shame’.⁶¹ Indeed it was this accusation by Logan against the white women – rather than his accusations against the Nairn brothers – that most incensed the local white men, who evidently saw it as a kind of treachery by the police officer against the white community. As one of the Nairns’ neighbours declared, it was ‘scandalous to think that a man in Logan’s position would be base enough to lay such a charge against respectable ladies without having just grounds’.⁶²

Only the local policeman interviewed by Ritchie, who presumably knew Logan, was relatively calm,⁶³ but Constable Pollett did proffer an explanation for Logan making such an outrageous report in the first place. Pollett stated that back in February 1898, when Logan returned Tommy to Byro station from the police station where Tommy had been serving his sentence for absconding, Logan ‘tried his utmost to entice the native and his woman to proceed back to Mt Gould with him’. Logan and Walter Nairn argued over Tommy, but Tommy remained with Nairn. Pollett suggested that ‘the whole of this Report is a bit of spite on Logan’s part, as he wanted the native Tommy as a native assistant’. His statement was supported by that of Frederick Caesar, overseer at a neighbouring station, taken a few days earlier.⁶⁴

⁶⁰ Memo, Prinsep to the Premier, 23 August 1898.

⁶¹ Statement of M D Rowan; Statement of John Tyson; Statement of A Daly; Statement of Frederick Henry Caesar.

⁶² Statement of A Daly.

⁶³ He said only that as far as he saw on his visits to Byro, he did not think the Misses Nairns watched Caroline, and he did not believe ‘that they would do such a thing’ as lock her in their bedroom: Statement of PC A Pollett.

⁶⁴ Statement of PC A Pollett; Statement of Frederick Henry Caesar.

Ritchie seized upon this explanation in his report. 'With regard to W Nairn's daughters watching Caroline, I won't say on behalf of the uncle only but on any account is certainly false and altogether without foundation', he wrote,

And I cannot conscience how Logan could be guilty of such low and degraded thoughts as to make such a charge against respectable young women ... The whole tone of Logans Report is very spiteful and vindictive against the Nairn Bros and Family, and this is all on account of the few words that passed between him and Walter Nairn last February in reference to the native Tommy⁶⁵

and with that the case was closed. With the innocence of the young Nairn women affirmed, regardless of the rather anarchic state of sexual affairs at Byro that the report had revealed, a sense of order was restored. Ritchie's report and papers went to Prinsep⁶⁶ who in turn forwarded it all to the Premier. 'There seems no reason to believe that the Messrs Nairn are cruel, or even harsh, with the Aborigines in their employ', Prinsep wrote in his covering memo to Forrest,

but there is evidence of a very low morality, which I presume we cannot interfere with, until the native women complain – The white ladies on the station seem to be living in the most blissful ignorance of what is going on 'down in the gully & just outside the garden walk'.⁶⁷

Although there was some minor question over whether or not Walter, being a Protector, should now be stood down – resolved when Prinsep pointed out that the system of appointing local Protectors had been abolished now anyway – it appears that nothing went further. The happy idea that Logan's report was filed simply to embarrass the Nairn family and that the 'white ladies' were not, after all, conniving to assist their uncle's access to Aboriginal women seemed to fully restore the authorities' sense of moral equilibrium and good order. But considering that nobody had actually dared to ask the white ladies anything about the matter at all, Prinsep's complacency smacks of wishful thinking, of a need for reassurance against a possibility simply too challenging to contemplate.

⁶⁵ Ritchie Report.

⁶⁶ Memo, Phillips to Lawrence, and Phillips to Chief Protector, 19 December 1898.

⁶⁷ Memo, Prinsep to the Premier, 21 December 1898.

‘His wife deserves all respect possible’

The absence of the white women’s voices in the Nairn investigation is striking, not just because of the nature of the case, but because the Aboriginal women’s voices, heavily edited as they were, were given such prominence. We must presume that William Nairn would have been highly affronted had his three daughters or his wife been interviewed. William possibly was aware of Ritchie’s vulnerability in this regard. Back in early 1898, Ritchie’s surprisingly courageous investigation into serious allegations that Kimberley settler Jerry Durack was implicated in the murder of a young Aboriginal boy had been abruptly curtailed and Ritchie removed from the case. An intriguing memo between Durack family members written at the time suggests that the Duracks considered exposing Ritchie’s ‘connection’ with Aboriginal ‘gins’ to embarrass him, and more pointedly his wife, to ensure his silence: ‘He is a married man his wife deserves all respect possible.’⁶⁸ Whether or not Ritchie was actually blackmailed by the Duracks, or indeed by the Nairns, it is a telling insight into the social mores on the colonial frontier and the sensitivities around interviewing ‘respectable’ women on such a subject.

William Nairn’s three older daughters did not rate a mention in a celebratory pioneer history published in 1980,⁶⁹ but amateur family historians have recovered the names and birthdates for the three older girls: Emma, Christine Clementine and Mary Ann. They were aged 22, 21 and 19 at the time of the investigation, a little younger than Caroline herself, who was said to be about 25.⁷⁰ As three unmarried and eligible white women in a region where such were a scarce commodity, the Nairn girls were no doubt more visible in their own time than they would appear in the records. The Aboriginal girl they had grown up with looked after their younger brothers and sisters,⁷¹ not only freeing them from such

⁶⁸ Quoted in Green *The Forrest River Massacres*, 67–68. The term ‘gin’ in this context implied that the women were prostitutes. It should also be noted that Logan had left the district by the time of Ritchie’s investigation, and had retired from the force altogether soon after it concluded: Memo, Phillips to Lawrence, and Phillips to Chief Protector, 19 December 1898; 373/1898.

⁶⁹ John Nairn *Come in Billy Nairn*, Perth: North Stirling Press 1980, 211.

⁷⁰ Various online family trees accessed at Ancestry.com. Accessed 31 July 2012. Available from: www.ancestry.com.au. To protect the privacy of descendants, I have not provided the names of the creators of these trees.

⁷¹ This was the only duty expected of her that was mentioned in the investigation, while Mary Ann, who had taken Polly’s place, stated that she was responsible for the household cleaning and washing.

filial obligations, but serving as a foil for their virtuous whiteness. But did they keep her captive?

Caroline's account of having run away from Sarah Nairn, and her daughters catching her and bringing her back, seems unequivocal. Yet she went on to state that although she had slept in 'Miss Amy's' bedroom with the door locked, it was 'only when Mr and Mrs Nairn was away from the station and I was frightened to sleep in the Kitchen', suggesting that she was only confined on her wishes: 'When they are at home I sleep either in the kitchen or the house.'⁷² Mary Ann denied ever seeing the Misses Nairn watching Caroline or sending Aborigines after her to bring her back,⁷³ while Polly, confirming that Caroline slept at the house, reportedly said that the 'door was never locked to my knowledge'; she also said that it was Walter himself who brought Caroline back the one time she ran away.⁷⁴ Three of the four Aboriginal men interviewed also denied that the Misses Nairn watched Caroline or prevented her from going where she wanted, with even Tommy reportedly stating emphatically that he had 'never seen the Miss Nairns watching Caroline, they never did', adding 'I have been on the station all the time and would know if they did.'⁷⁵ Only Banjoe, Mary Ann's husband, did not actually deny that the Nairn girls kept guard over Caroline. He told Ritchie that one night, while he was in the kitchen getting his supper, he 'saw the Mrs lock her up in the front room'. But he did not mention Walter's nieces.⁷⁶

We cannot be sure whether the Aboriginal respondents were being less forthright on the question of the role played by the Misses Nairn than they were on Walter's sex life, or whether Ritchie had taken some licence with their statements on this subject; or, indeed, whether Logan's accusation itself was false. We might, perhaps, consider the position of the girls' mother, who could have had her reasons to keep Caroline as a decoy, to protect her daughters from her bachelor brother-in-law. What we can be sure of, however, and what the Nairn case file illuminates particularly brightly, is the anxieties that were provoked among the white

⁷² Statement of Caroline/Mowaremarra, 17 November 1898; 373/1898. 'Miss Amy' could have been the young cousin of William (and Walter) Nairn, the daughter of their uncle, who was 15 in 1898 and whose parents lived further south at Carnamah and Dongara: see entry 'Amy Nairn', *The Carnamah-Winchester Database*, Carnamah Historical Society. Accessed 31 July 2012. Available from: www.carnamah.com.au.

⁷³ Statement of Mary Ann/Williambury.

⁷⁴ Statement of Polly/Murris, 19 November 1898; 373/1898.

⁷⁵ Statement of Tommy/Mejarra; see also Statement of Jack/Wiberoo, 19 November 1898; Statement of Cockatoo/Wanmoor.

⁷⁶ Walter Nairn Remarks.

men at the notion that the three young women were in any way complicit in their uncle's relationships with Aboriginal women. We might read the purpose of Ritchie's investigation being not so much to establish whether or not Walter Nairn was having sex with Caroline and Polly, nor whether he had fathered Caroline's child, but to investigate – and disprove – the destabilising and disturbing claim about his nieces' role in the affair. The investigation circled around two key issues: whether the Nairn girls' restraint of Caroline was, as Logan had claimed, 'common talk amongst the white residents', and whether the appropriate spatial boundaries between the white and the black women of the Nairn household had been transgressed.

All statements taken from both white and Aboriginal respondents abounded with references to having 'heard,' or not, stories about Walter's relationships with Caroline and Polly, about the paternity of Caroline's daughter Ruby and about the Misses Nairn watching Caroline. They certainly point to a lively circulation of rumours about Walter, at least, amongst the wider Aboriginal community, but this did not seem to be threatening in itself. The more sensitive point was whether rumours about the Misses Nairn had 'crossed over' into the white community and been bandied about among station owners, managers and overseers scattered around the various runs. Frederick Caesar, the overseer of Milly Milly station, arguing that if Caroline was being held prisoner by the Nairns he would 'have heard of it from the other Natives', provided a typical litany of denial:

I have never heard tell of Caroline attempting to run away and being watched, by William Nairn's Daughters, nor have I heard tell of the Miss Nairns ever taking Caroline into their bedroom and making her sleep on the floor and locking the door. I have never heard from the natives of the room being locked and it is not true that it is common talk among the residents of the district.⁷⁷

The notion that salacious gossip about white women might be circulating between the black and white communities was clearly concerning, suggesting as it did that the settler community shared with the Indigenous communities an inappropriate and destabilising lack of respect for white women's propriety. But as a result of such denials, Ritchie concluded that Logan's statement about the Nairn girls watching Caroline being 'common talk amongst whites' was false: 'I cannot find any truth in it.'⁷⁸

⁷⁷ Statement of Frederick Henry Caesar. See also Statement of Geoff Davis; Statement of A Daly.

⁷⁸ Ritchie Report.

The other key issue, where Caroline actually slept at night, highlights the peculiar prescriptions for socio-spatial relations on the northwestern frontiers of settlement. It was, as William Nairn had made clear, out of the question that Caroline might return to the Aboriginal 'camp' at night, or indeed visit there at any time: 'she looks after the children, and we do not think it right for her to go to the native camp, where she will be mixed up with all kinds of filth and disease, and come back handling the young children', he stated primly to Ritchie.⁷⁹ Allowing Caroline to go back and forth from the Nairn nursery to the Aboriginal community would have brought not just physical contamination, but a psychic and symbolic blemishing of the Nairn home; for the private, protected white family home itself was constructed in direct opposition to the disorderly and publicly open Aboriginal camp.⁸⁰ Caroline could 'handle' the bodies of young white children, but only if she did not function as a conduit between Aboriginal and white sociality.

When it came to Caroline's location within the Nairn home, however, the situation became more highly charged. It appears that although she sometimes slept in the house itself, Caroline was generally compelled to sleep in the kitchen. Here, too, other Aboriginal people who worked for the Nairns gathered to get their 'supper'. The kitchen would have undoubtedly been separate from the residential dwelling and at the rear. A detached kitchen near the back door was typical for nineteenth century squatters' homesteads in Australia and was where the household servants typically slept and ate. It has been speculated that this arrangement originated from the fact that the early colonial domestic servants were convicts (and not trusted in the house while their employers were sleeping), or had to do with fear of fire, heat or smells; but perhaps an equally convincing socio-spatial explanation might be found in the history of Aboriginal domestic work.⁸¹ The kitchen was a liminal space, identified as an area where Aboriginal people could be visibly present and close to the white home, but not *too* close.⁸² In this respect, the kitchen, simultaneously

⁷⁹ Statement of W (William) J Nairn.

⁸⁰ See Gillian Cowlishaw *Rednecks, Eggheads and Blackfellas: A Study of Racial Power and Intimacy in Australia*, Sydney: Allen & Unwin 1999: 63.

⁸¹ See Barry Higman, citing John Hirst on the impact of convictism, in *Domestic Service in Australia*, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press 2002, 214. For the separate kitchen as a distinctive Australian arrangement, see also Higman *Domestic Service*, 208, 215–216; Anthony Trollope *Australia and New Zealand*, volume I, 3rd ed, London: Chapman and Hall 1876, 155; Robin Boyd *Australia's Home: Its Origins, Builders and Occupiers*, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press 1987, 33–34.

⁸² For a telling anecdote about Aboriginal people being compelled to eat in the kitchen, despite the fact that the station owner in question slept with the women, see Willey Boss

public and private, and located between the camp and the home, signified a space for Aboriginal women that both tweaked and alleviated anxieties about the permeability of colonial borders. Like the colonial verandah, the Nairn kitchen was both 'a place of confinement and avoidance' for Aboriginal women.⁸³ 'I have seen [Caroline] out with the other natives at the back of the Kitchen getting their food together', the local policeman had recorded in Ritchie's investigation, as a way of demonstrating that her association with the family was not overly intimate.⁸⁴ But here, too, Aboriginal people could see into the white home, as did Banjoe, peering in to see Mrs Nairn locking Caroline in the front room as he collected his supper one night.

The girls' bedrooms were another space entirely. William stated that he had 'never known Caroline to sleep in my daughters' bedroom, if she did, it must have been while I was away. There has never been a lock turned on her to my knowledge.'⁸⁵ Although she cared for the Nairn children and had virtually grown up with the older Nairn girls, the space of their bedrooms was considered generally out of bounds for Caroline. It is clear that the notion of a young Aboriginal woman sharing the intimate sleeping area of young white women threatened the crucial distinctions of race.

For it was surely this charge – that Caroline was kept in the Nairn girls' bedrooms – and not simply that she was having sexual relations with their uncle or indeed with any white man, that caused such consternation. Ritchie's investigation disclosed beyond any doubt that lots of sex with Aboriginal women was going on just outside the house. Indeed there is a kind of cumulative description of a particular site, close to the house and just outside the homestead's garden, a shallow gully where the Aboriginal women regularly went to get water from a small well and where Caroline had said she was once caught and dragged back to the house by Mrs Nairn's daughters for a beating.⁸⁶ Located outside the house and down in the gully, this interracial sexuality was shorn of much of its dangers and destabilisations. The logic underpinning the abuse and sexual exploitation of Aboriginal women was premised on their essential difference from white women when it came to sexuality: the former

Drover, 19–20.

⁸³ Liz Reed "'Mrs Bon's verandah full of Aboriginals': race, class, gender and friendship", *History Australia* 2 (2), 2005, 3–4.

⁸⁴ Statement of PC A Pollett.

⁸⁵ Statement of W (William) J Nairn.

⁸⁶ Statement of Caroline/Mowaremarra; Statement of Mary Ann/Williambury; Statement of Banjo/Niabatteroo; Statement of Tommy/Mejarra; Walter Nairn Remarks.

openly accessible and promiscuous, the latter restricted, protected and innocent. If it were shown, however, Caroline was indeed kept in the bedrooms of the house, the space inextricably associated with protected white womanhood, an unthinkable possibility would have become an inescapable conclusion: that the Nairn women were fully aware of interracial sex and endorsed it.

'Most blissful ignorance'

Within the archives the Nairn case is a visible example of the multitude of undocumented personal and localised interrelations that made up the Australian frontier, vividly imagined by historian Jan Critchett as 'just down the yard or as close as the bed shared with an Aboriginal woman'.⁸⁷ It also offers the unusual proposition that white women may not only have understood the nature of that sexual frontier, whether played out in the gully or in their own bedroom, but actively colluded in it. However, if it would seem almost beyond belief that William Nairn's three daughters did not have at least some idea about their uncle's relationships with Caroline and Polly, it is impossible to confirm even this from the records – let alone that they were aiding and assisting him in his amours as Logan had so scandalously alleged.

In the end their 'complicity' or 'innocence' is not the real issue: rather it is the way that a gendered binarism of race operated on the colonial frontier to deal with the challenges posed by interracial sex. In the archive of the Nairn investigation, white women's sexuality was constructed in absolute opposition to Aboriginal women's sexuality. While Caroline, Polly and Mary Ann were interrogated about their sexual lives and knowledge with no apparent regard for their personal feelings, William Nairn's daughters were protected from any kind of embarrassment in being obliged to defend their own reputation. It was unthinkable that the Nairn women could be interviewed about their uncle's relations with Caroline and Polly, for how could their virtuous innocence be sustained if they were asked such impertinent questions? In the end, the most important thing to protect and maintain was, as Prinsep so eloquently put it, white women's 'most blissful ignorance of what is going on "down in the gully & just outside the garden walk"'.⁸⁷

⁸⁷ Critchett *A Distant Field of Murder*, 23.

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