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‘To Exercise a Beneficial Influence Over a Man’: Marriage, Gender and the Native Institutions in Early Colonial Australia

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This chapter examines understandings of marriage among missionaries and humanitarians connected with two early colonial ‘Native Institutions’. A comparison of the Parramatta Native Institution in New South Wales and the Albany Native Institution in Western Australia demonstrates that concerns about marriage were central in discussions about the formation and maintenance of these Institutions. Both of these Institutions were established and supported by British evangelicals, who had brought with them to Australia powerful assumptions about gender roles, particularly in marriage. These assumptions influenced their decisions regarding the children who resided in the Native Institutions. Within specific colonial contexts, however, the assumptions of humanitarians and missionaries did not remain static, and debates over the futures of the Aboriginal children they sought to educate reveal complex and shifting hierarchies of race, gender and class.

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'TO EXERCISE A BENEFICIAL INFLUENCE OVER A MAN':
MARRIAGE, GENDER AND THE NATIVE INSTITUTIONS IN
EARLY COLONIAL AUSTRALIA

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Among missionaries and administrators concerned about the fate of Aborigines in early colonial Australia, many concluded that boarding schools or orphanages for young Aboriginal children would be the most effective tool for Christianisation and ‘civilisation’. Such schools or orphanages – sometimes labelled ‘Native Institutions’ – were established early in the settlement of several colonies. Given the subsequent history of Aboriginal child removal in Australia, historians have examined such schools as nascent expressions of a response to Aboriginal culture and community that would have tragic results in the longer term. This chapter considers two of these institutions from a different perspective, that provided by a focus on gender. Examining the Parramatta Native Institution in New South Wales, and the Albany Native Institution in Western Australia, it becomes clear that concerns about marriage were central in the formation and maintenance of these schools. Discussions of Aboriginal marriage among humanitarians and missionaries involved with the Institutions are revealing of complicated and sometimes conflicting assumptions about race, class and gender.

The Native Institutions at Parramatta and Albany were both established in the early years of white settlement in their respective colonies and both represented cooperative efforts between evangelicals and the colonial administration. In New South Wales, the Parramatta Native Institution was formed as a result of the initiative of a former missionary of the London Missionary Society (LMS), William Shelley. Shelley and his wife Elizabeth had been missionaries in Tahiti, until they moved to Sydney in 1807. In 1810, the reform-minded Lachlan Macquarie arrived to govern the colony of New South Wales. Four years later, Shelley wrote to Macquarie with a number of proposals regarding Aboriginal welfare, framed in terms of a concern for Aboriginal civilisation. Shelley began his letter: ‘The civilisation of the Natives of this Continent … having frequently occupied my thoughts, I take the liberty of laying before Your Excellency a few ideas on that important Subject’.

Shelley went on to state that, contrary to the prejudices of settlers, Aborigines were as capable of ‘education’ and ‘civilisation’ as anyone else. However, he argued, previous efforts at assimilating Aborigines had been thwarted by the problems faced by ‘civilised’ Aborigines who desired a marriage partner:

Young Men live in a prospect of Marriage, and have ambition and pride to be respectable in their own Society. No European Woman would marry a Native unless some abandoned profligate. The same may be said of Native Women received for a time among Europeans. A solitary individual, either

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Woman or Man, educated from infancy, even well, among Europeans, would, in general, when they grew up, be rejected by the other Sex of Europeans, and must go into the Bush for a companion.5

To be successful, Shelley suggested, any efforts to ‘civilise’ Aborigines must include the provision of suitable marriage partners. His solution involved ‘a Public Establishment’ with sex-segregated dormitories, in which Aboriginal children would be taught ‘reading, writing, & religious education; the Boys manual labour, agriculture, mechanic arts &c., the Girls sewing, knitting, spinning or such usefull [sic] employments as are suitable for them’. Following their education in this institution, Shelley urged ‘let them be married at a Suitable age, and settled with steady religious Persons over them’.6

Macquarie apparently responded enthusiastically to Shelley’s suggestion, because by the end of 1814 a set of rules and regulations for the proposed Native Institution had been gazetted in government and general orders.7 Macquarie described the Institution as ‘an Acknowledgement to which [the Natives] are to some degree entitled’ given the ‘natural Advantages’ they had lost through British Settlement. The Parramatta Native Institution was established with William Shelley as Manager, and his wife assisting. A number of Aboriginal children who had already been living with the Shelleys were the first inmates. Writing to an LMS board member in late 1814, Shelley declared his confidence in the ability of the children and his desire to learn the local language so as to communicate better with them.8

William Shelley did not, however, have the opportunity to fulfil this desire. In July the following year he died and his wife, Elizabeth Shelley, took his place as Manager. Assisted by a white couple, she ran the Institution until 1823, when it was closed down. During this eight-year period, the Institution played an important role in Macquarie’s efforts to engage the local Aboriginal people. Each year, at a Congress to which all local Aborigines were invited, the school children were paraded, dressed in white and led by Mrs Shelley. The Sydney Gazette reported these events in terms which, while somewhat improbable, were clearly designed to warm the humanitarian settler’s heart:

It was grateful to the bosom of sensibility to trace the degrees of pleasure which the chiefs manifested on this occasion … one in particular turning round towards the governor, with emotion, exclaimed ‘Governor – that will make a good Settler – that’s my Pickaninny!’ – and some of their females were observed to shed tears of sympathetic affection at seeing the infant and hapless offspring of their deceased friends so happily sheltered and protected by British benevolence.9

Macquarie believed that upon viewing their children in such a civilised state, the Aborigines present would be encouraged to send more children to be educated in white ways.

In spite of Macquarie’s efforts, the Institution failed to attract significant numbers of Aboriginal children. While by 1818 there were nineteen children in residence, numbers fluctuated wildly as children regularly ran away or were removed by their parents. Nevertheless, the children who remained did well in their education, much
to the delight of those humanitarians who pointed to their achievements as evidence of Aboriginal ability. In 1819, Macquarie wrote to Lord Bathurst, enthusing that the Institution ‘had succeeded far beyond my most sanguine Expectations, the Children having made very great Progress in all those Useful and Necessary Branches of Instruction they are taught, evincing good Natural Understandings, and an Aptitude for learning whatever is proposed to be taught them’. A few weeks later, a student at the Institution named Maria won first prize in the state public examinations – an achievement that was widely publicised. Maria was later to marry an ex-convict named Robert Lock and become a Sydney landowner.

Marriage for the inhabitants clearly remained an important aim of the Institution. In 1821, two of the older schoolgirls were married to Aboriginal men considered adequately civilised, one of whom was a native police assistant. The couples were granted land and goods by Macquarie and went to live in the Richmond Road area, known as Black Town, which Macquarie had set aside for Aboriginal settlement. Later in the year, three more women from the school were married, suggesting that Elizabeth Shelley was committed to marrying off her scholars as soon as possible.

Around the same time, however, the Institution experienced a wave of illness: four children died and three more were removed by their parents when they became sick. The number of students at the school dropped sharply, as Aboriginal parents refused to entrust their children to a place where deaths had occurred. Governor Macquarie was facing his own trials and, with his recall to England in 1822, the Native Institution lost its most powerful supporter. In 1823, Elizabeth Shelley sent the remaining children to Black Town, where a small Native Institution lingered on under the supervision of Church Missionaries. By 1828, the school had closed entirely.

William Shelley had believed that the Native Institution, by providing appropriate marriage partners for civilised Aborigines, would create the foundation for the permanent transformation of Indigenous people. In 1838, ten years after the Institution closed, its impact was evaluated by the Committee on the Aboriginal Question. The Committee interviewed Elizabeth Shelley, whose assessment of the long-term influence of the Institution was not positive:

Several of the girls had married black men, but instead of having the effect intended, of reclaiming them, they eventually followed their husbands into the bush, after having given away and destroyed all the supplies with which they had been furnished by the government. Since that period, some of them have occasionally visited me, and I found they had relapsed into all the bad habits of the untaught native.

Mrs Shelley told the Committee that when she spoke to her former students now on religious subjects, they ‘turned them into laughter, and said they had forgotten all about it’.

The Committee heard an even more negative assessment from Lieutenant Sadler, Master of the Male Orphan School, Liverpool. He had examined the school in 1826, when it was at Black Town, and was critical of its underlying rationale:
The idea entertained in establishing the Black Town School, that the females being civilised, would be the means of civilising the male population, still savage, went upon a principle directly opposed to what our knowledge of the savage character teaches; namely, that the female has scarcely any influence over man in his uncivilised state.\textsuperscript{17}

The ‘absurdity of the theory’ behind the school was proved by the results, Sadler argued. While the school had shown that ‘the natives are susceptible of at least intellectual, if not moral improvement’, after marriage to ‘unreclaimed blacks’, the women quickly ‘relapsed back again into their savage habits’.

Elizabeth Shelley’s and Lieutenant Sadler’s comments in 1838 suggest the existence of ongoing debates among white humanitarians regarding the best way to civilise Aborigines. They also suggest that over the years, the Native Institution had changed somewhat in its aims in relation to Aboriginal marriage. Where William Shelley had argued that civilised Aboriginal men and women required a similarly assimilated marriage partner, both Elizabeth Shelley and Lieutenant Sadler spoke as though the Institution expected civilised women to ‘reclaim’ men who had not been assimilated in the same way.

The expectation that a wife of superior character could ‘reclaim’ an errant man reflected a powerful discourse within nineteenth-century British Evangelical culture, which celebrated the transformative power of the morally elevated wife.\textsuperscript{18} As the century progressed, this understanding was increasingly applied to the mission context. As Susan Thorne has noted, missionaries were increasingly convinced that ‘[h]eathen women, like their metropolitan counterparts, were the most important influence on their entire family’s capacity for piety. It was they who would support or discourage their husbands through the sacrifices and suffering entailed in receiving Christ into their lives’.\textsuperscript{19} It was this conviction which, later in the century, opened the door for British women to take a more active role in missionary work, because of their ability to access and evangelise their ‘heathen’ sisters.

Though civilisation rather than ‘Christianisation’ was the explicitly identified goal of the Parramatta Native Institution, contemporary discussions of the Institution reveal similar assumptions about the significance of wives within a ‘heathen’ marriage. Elizabeth Shelley’s comments suggest that during the period of her administration of the Institution, the belief that women educated there could be used to ‘reclaim’ less civilised Aboriginal men was potent. Sadler’s criticism of the Native Institution was not of the belief in the power of a virtuous wife, but in its application to the ‘savage character’. Race, for Sadler, was a more determinative category than gender.

This very early attempt at Christianising and civilising Aborigines in the settler context established Aboriginal marriage as a key issue for the missionary project. Marriage, in these discussions, is seen as a source of salvation or damnation: a means by which Aboriginal men could be ‘reclaimed’ or by which Aboriginal women could ‘relapse’ into ‘savage habits’. In spite of Elizabeth Shelley’s obvious sense of failure regarding the Parramatta Native Institution, and Lieutenant Sadler’s criticism of the principles upon which it had been run, very similar assumptions can be seen at work shortly after these criticisms were voiced, in the formation of the Albany Native Institution.
In the year that the Committee on the Native Question was meeting in Sydney, a woman named Anne Breeze arrived in Fremantle from England. She had come as governess to the children of a missionary sent out by the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (SPG). The Rev. William Mitchell, with his wife Francis, had been sent to establish a mission and school for Aboriginal people at Middle Swan. Mitchell gave up on Aboriginal mission work almost immediately, but remained in the area as a clergyman for over twenty years.  

The Mitchells did not continue their ministry among local Aboriginal people, but Anne Breeze retained a strong concern for their welfare. In 1840, she married a local settler, Henry Camfield, who shared her devout Evangelical faith. Writing to her father-in-law in England, Anne lamented the spiritual state of the colony: ‘It is melancholy to see the indifference to the care of their souls (the grand object of their creation) manifested among the people here’. In 1848, Henry was appointed Government Resident in Albany. By this time, Anne appears to have been caring for a small number of Aboriginal children, whom she prepared for baptism. Henry wrote to his sister: ‘Anne is very much interested in the sable race. There is plenty to work upon if their presently dark minds were duly cultivated’.

Anne’s activities were encouraged by the newly appointed Anglican Archdeacon, John Ramsden Wollaston, who believed that the colonists had seriously neglected the welfare of the Aboriginal people they had displaced. In 1851, Wollaston wrote to the SPG, claiming: ‘a very strong feeling prevails among the right thinking portion of the white population that a greater effort than ever should now be made to promote the civilisation and Christian education of native children’. Through Wollaston’s efforts, Governor Fitzgerald granted land and some initial funds for the establishment of a Native Institution. The SPG also promised to provide ongoing funding.

Unable to find a suitable manager for the Institution, Wollaston asked Anne Camfield to begin the Institution within her own home. She agreed to do so for a period of one year. In November 1852, the Institution was opened in Henry and Anne Camfields’ home and within six months Anne was caring for ten children with the help of two Aboriginal assistants, Ellen Wells and Ellen Trimmer. In spite of Wollaston’s efforts, however, no alternative manager for the Institution could be found and the local colonists proved unwilling to provide financial support. After Wollaston’s death in 1856, the Camfields erected accommodation for the children next to their own home and the Institution became popularly known as ‘Annesfield’ or the Camfield Institution. As the boys at the school grew older, they were transferred to orphanages in Perth, so that only young children and older girls remained at Annesfield.

As with the Native Institution in Parramatta, contemporary discussions of the school at Albany focused on the question of marriage. In 1858, a lengthy article about Annesfield in the *Inquirer and Commercial News* praised a young woman from the school who was preparing for marriage to a ‘well-conducted, sober, industrious conditional-pardon man’. The author of the article argued that even prejudiced colonists would be forced to acknowledge that the bride-to-be:

would bear comparison with any white girl among the most respectable of the labouring population, both as a sensible and companionable girl. She is,
by her usefulness and other good qualities, every way calculated to make a happy home for her future husband.\textsuperscript{26}

For the writer of this article, young ‘half-caste’ women educated by Anne Camfield and her helpers offered a solution to the broader shortage of wives in the colony. To rear and educate one ‘half-caste’ girl would be cheaper than bringing one convict woman to the colony. ‘And which of the two’ the writer asked rhetorically ‘would be most likely to exercise a beneficial influence over a man, as his wife?’

The cry in the newspapers and throughout the colony is, and has been, the evil of the great disparity in number of the sexes; and to counteract it, the introduction of female convicts is advocated by many. Why not, before trying this hazardous experiment, perform an act of justice to the natives, by relieving them of the care and trouble of bringing up children that are half European.\textsuperscript{27}

This proposal is again revealing of underlying assumptions about the moral power of a virtuous wife. In New South Wales, educated Aboriginal women had been considered potentially redemptive wives for less civilised members of their race, but for this writer, such women could ‘exercise a beneficial influence’ even over white men. Race was interpreted by this writer in relation to class – Aboriginal women bore comparison only with ‘the most respectable of the labouring population’, suggesting that class, not race, was the insurmountable barrier in marriage.

By the standards of white missionaries and humanitarians, the Albany Native Institution was a success. The young women under Anne Camfield’s care were trained in domestic skills, but also given a good broader education in reading, writing and music. The older girls found employment as domestics in Albany households, and a number were married to working-class white men or Christian Aborigines.\textsuperscript{28} Marriages were arranged by missionaries between women from the Albany Native Institution and men from the Swan River Wesleyan Mission and the Moravian missions in Victoria. One of these young women, Bessie Flower, was employed as school teacher at Ramahyuck Mission in Gippsland, in eastern Victoria.\textsuperscript{29}

In spite of – or perhaps because of – the success of the mission in educating Aboriginal women, appropriate marriages remained a central concern for those running the Albany Native Institution. In 1872 Janet Millett, a contemporary of Anne Camfield, wrote:

Mrs Camfield’s chief difficulty is how to settle her girls in life, for when grown up the inevitable question arises, Whom are they to marry? They cannot, after the training they have received, take a savage husband; and though I believe two of her pupils have married ticket-of-leave men, yet the prospects held out by such alliances are poor rewards for adopting Christian habits, and but sorry inducements for retaining them.\textsuperscript{30}

Whereas the earlier newspaper article had promoted marriages between the women of Annesfield and conditional-pardon men, for Millett ‘such alliances’ were not worthy of these civilised Aborigines. Millet’s comment was partly a recognition that
the women of Annesfield had been educated well beyond the standard achieved by most ex-convicts. While these women’s educational achievements were valuable to missionaries as evidence of Aboriginal ability, they challenged the broad humanitarian assumption that civilised Aboriginal people would naturally take their place among the working class. The troubled life of Annesfield’s star graduate, Bessie Flower, demonstrates the severe limitations facing a highly-educated Aboriginal woman in nineteenth-century Australia.

Ultimately, like its counterpart in Parramatta, the Albany Native Institution did not survive long. Henry Camfield died in 1872 and Anne Camfield’s health did not allow her to continue playing a major role in the Institution. The Bishop of Perth, Matthew Hale, who had previously established Poonindie Mission in South Australia, moved the Institution into the grounds of his own home. In this location, Aboriginal children were educated under the care of Ellen Trimmer, who had previously been Anne Camfield’s assistant. After Hale left Perth, the children were sent to the Church of England orphanage and the Institution was closed. Anne Camfield remained in Perth and stayed in touch with many of her former pupils until her death.

Though both the Parramatta Native Institution and the Camfield Institution were short-lived, they played a significant role in the formation of humanitarian attitudes towards Aboriginal welfare and civilisation. The excellent results of children in both schools were used as evidence of the intellectual abilities of Aboriginal people. In 1865, for example, Florence Nightingale used Annesfield as evidence of Aboriginal ability in a lecture given to the National Association for the Foundation of Social Service in England.

As has been noted, the two Institutions provided a focus for ongoing debates among humanitarians about the role of marriage in the civilising process. In these discussions, we see the complex and shifting hierarchies of race, class and gender that were being constructed and negotiated by humanitarians. Could Aboriginal women be the source of a civilising and Christianising influence, or did the racial degradation of Aborigines mean that such women would be themselves influenced back into ‘savage’ ways? Could civilised Aboriginal women ‘exercise a beneficial influence over’ the largely working-class ex-convict male population, or would ‘such alliances’ be beneath these educated women? These questions were answered in ways that reveal humanitarians’ attempts to interpret the common belief in the redeeming power of a good woman within the colonial context. This provides evidence of the importance of a broader evangelical and humanitarian culture in influencing those colonists who attempted to Christianise Aboriginal people.

More significantly, perhaps, the comparison of the two institutions demonstrates that the assumptions white humanitarians brought with them from Britain could be altered in the specific contexts of early colonial Australia. The willingness of Western Australian humanitarians to discuss – and even encourage – marriages between Aboriginal women and ex-convicts may reflect the fact that the colony of Western Australia did not accept female convicts. Thus, while men outnumbered women in every Australian colony, the imbalance was particularly extreme in Western Australia. That this influenced humanitarian attitudes to inter-racial marriages in suggested by the fact that other Western Australian missionaries, such as John Smithies, also encouraged marriages between Aboriginal women and white men.
By contrast, for missionaries in the eastern colonies, such relationships appear to have been either unthinkable – as for William Shelley – or strongly discouraged. If Bessie Flower had stayed in Western Australia, she might have married an ex-convict, but at the Victorian mission of Ramahyuck, the missionaries prevented her from marrying a white man who proposed to her. These differences point to the importance of specific context in understanding humanitarian attitudes to race and gender in Australia.

The Native Institutions at Parramatta and Albany are also notable for another reason. Both appear to have allowed women to have authority to an unusual degree. Elizabeth Shelley was paid Manager of the Parramatta Native Institution for seven years after her husband died; Anne Camfield ran the Albany Native Institution from its inception until around 1872; and Ellen Trimmer, who one scholar has identified as Aboriginal, was in charge for its final couple of years. As far as I am aware, no other woman would have sole responsibility for a mission in Australia throughout the nineteenth century.

The prominent role that women played in these Institutions can be explained with reference to a number of factors. Unlike many later missions, the Native Institutions were urban in location and entirely focused on the education of children. They were modelled on a domestic set-up and as such were a ‘natural’ context for female activity and authority. The emphasis on producing ‘virtuous wives’, which this chapter has identified, probably also contributed to opportunities for women to take a leading role in the care and education of the children. Such spaces for relatively independent activities by humanitarian women would be diminished when the model of the Native Institution was largely abandoned in favour of remote missions, where Aboriginal people were to be ‘protected’ from contact with white settlers.

Examining the Parramatta and Albany Native Institutions, therefore, it is obvious that marriage was a central and contested issue in white humanitarian engagement with Aborigines during the early years of the colonies of New South Wales and Western Australia. Concerns about Aboriginal marriage reflected the gendered assumptions about morality that white humanitarians brought with them, as well as the specific challenges of different colonial societies. While neither institution survived long, the question of the exact relationship between Aboriginal marriage, civilisation and Christianisation would remain a vexed one for missionaries and humanitarians throughout the nineteenth century.

Endnotes

1 Examples include the Merri Creek Baptist School (Victoria); Parramatta Native Institution and Black Town School (both in New South Wales); Point McLeay Mission School, Albany Native Institution (both in Western Australia).
2 Peter Read, ‘Shelley’s Mistake: The Parramatta Native Institution and the Stolen Generations’ in The Great Mistakes of Australian History ed. Martin Crotty and David Andrew Roberts (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2006), 32-47. Read’s thoughtful analysis of the Native Institution is somewhat undermined by his apparent confusion of Governor Macquarie’s (fourteen) rules for the school with William Shelley’s (six) initial proposals regarding the Institution.
3 Jean Stewart, The Shelley Family (Kenmore, Brisbane: Self-published, 2001), 63-64.
4 William Shelley to Governor Lachlan Macquarie, 8 April 1814. Add. 340, Mitchell Library (hereafter ML), Sydney.
5 Ibid.
6 Ibid.
11 John Harris, *One Blood: 200 Years of Aboriginal Encounter with Christianity, A Story of Hope* (Sutherland, NSW: Albatross, 1990), 45-46.
12 Brook and Kohen, *The Parramatta Native Institution*, 78-79.
13 Ibid., 83-84.
14 The complicated history of the Native Institution in its last few years is described by J.J. Fletcher, *Clean, Clad and Courteous: A History of Aboriginal Education in New South Wales* (Sydney: Southwood Press, 1989), 19-24.
15 Report from the Committee on the Aborigines Question with the Minutes of Evidence (1838). Add. 85, Dixson Library (hereafter DL), Sydney.
16 Ibid.
17 Ibid.
20 Harris, *One Blood*, 261-62.
21 In later years, the Mitchells appear to have taken an active interest in Anne Camfield’s work with Aboriginal children. See Bessie Flower to Annie Mitchell, 5 March 1866. AC66 CY2567, ML, Sydney.
23 Harris, *One Blood*, 262-63.
25 John Ramsden Wollaston to the Secretary, SPG, 21 June 1851. In *One Blood*, 264.
27 Ibid.
28 Harris, *One Blood*, 267-68.
31 Harris, *One Blood*, 268.
32 Attwood, ‘In the Name of All My Coloured Brethren and Sisters’.
33 Harris, *One Blood*, 268.
39 See Attwood, ‘In the Name of All My Coloured Brethren and Sisters’.
40 John Harris suggests that Ellen Trimmer was Aboriginal, but I have been unable to confirm this from the other sources available for the Albany Institution. Harris, *One Blood*, 264.