

Does the Torres Straits Pilot enlighten our frontier history?

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Abstract

The Torres Strait region has long been part of the Australian frontier. Its long serving newspaper, the weekly *Torres Straits Pilot*, published on Thursday Island from 1887 to 1942, was not only an advocate for the area's principal industry, pearl-shelling and *beche de mer* fishing, but strongly opposed to the implementation of the 1897 *Protection of Aborigines Act*, which effectively removed Aboriginal labour from the fishery, created the system of reserves, and thus also effectively marked the closing of the frontier. This paper examines some of the attitudes revealed by the extant copies of the newspaper 1897-1914 as the north Queensland frontier closed and the era of protection began.

Introduction

The current argument about the reliability of accounts of the destruction of Aboriginal society by historians such as Henry Reynolds (1972, 1984, 1989, 1995, 1996, 1998, 1999, 2000, 2001) and Lyndall Ryan (1996) is really a debate about the veracity and interpretation of historical sources (Windschuttle, 2002; Manne 1998; Blainey 1991, 1982a, 1982b). Newspapers are, of course, one of those primary sources.

The Torres Strait, and its islands, and Cape York Peninsula were among the last parts of the Australian frontier to be closed, and the process of bringing the rule of law to this part of the continent took the best part of the last third of the nineteenth century (Mullins, 1995). We now have a substantial amount of secondary material, both scholarly and popular, principally from anthropologists and historians, about the impact of European industry and settlement on the Torres Strait and northern Cape York Peninsula. Indeed, the story of this region in the nineteenth century is the story of the attempts by the colonial government, especially from 1866 onwards, to make the region secure for all its inhabitants – indigenous and European alike.

The major scholarly accounts published about this region are Loos' *Invasion and Resistance* (1982), Single's *The Torres Strait: People and History* (1979 and 1989), Ganter's *The Pearl-Shellers of Torres Strait* (1994) and Mullins' *Torres Strait: A History of Colonial Occupation and Culture Contact 1864-1897* (1995). All are highly informative, and worth reading, but none draws in any significant way on the *Torres Straits Pilot*, the weekly newspaper published at Thursday Island between 1887 and 1942. Nor do the anthropological accounts of Haddon (1971) *Reports of the Cambridge Anthropological Expedition to Torres Straits; Sharp Torres Strait Islands, 1879-1979: theme for an overview* (1980) and *Stars of Tagai: the Torres Strait Islanders* (1993) and Beckett (1987) *Torres Strait Islanders: custom and colonialism*. This paper discusses the contribution the extant copies (1897-1914) of the *Pilot* might make to our understanding of a revised history of race relations on the frontier.

The principal purpose of government activity in the region was to regulate the conditions under which labour was recruited into the fishery. Under constant pressure from those formidable forces of liberal opinion in Victorian England - the Clapham Evangelicals, the Anti-Slavery Society, and numerous mission agencies - governments in both Great Britain and the colonies were forced to constantly legislate to control the perpetuation of human rights abuses among indigenous peoples in the western Pacific, Papua, the Torres Strait and the Cape York Peninsula.

Hand in hand with the legislative agenda, was the attempt at pacification through the establishment of Christian missions, in itself a distinctively Victorian notion. At Somerset in 1866, the Rev F.C. Jagg made an unsuccessful attempt to start a mission for the SPCK (Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge), a Church of England mission agency). The non-conformist London Missionary Society (LMS) arrived at Murray Island in the eastern Torres Strait in 1871, the Lutherans and Anglicans commenced missions on the eastern coast of Cape York Peninsula in the 1880s, and the Presbyterians auspiced the Moravians at Mapoon on the west coast of the Peninsula in 1891, and at Weipa in 1898. The Moravians, a continental Lutheran offshoot dominated by an evangelical pietism akin to

Methodism, specialised in missions in geographically remote and climatically demanding regions, of which western Cape York Peninsula was but one.

Strategic beginnings

Yet the initial impetus for European settlement on the tip of Cape York Peninsula was geopolitical. As a critical shipping gateway between the growing capitals of the Australasian colonies and Batavia, India and the Cape of Good Hope, the shoals of the Torres Strait needed careful navigation, and as the nineteenth century progressed, protection against the successive influences of the French, the Germans, the Russians and the Japanese.

In 1864, John Jardine, the Police Magistrate at Rockhampton established a settlement at Somerset, on the northern tip of Cape York Peninsula, as a garrison and coaling station (Austin 1949: 219). Somerset's unsuitability had necessitated the establishment in 1877 of a settlement known as Port Kennedy on Thursday Island, which then became the staging post for colonial and imperial adventures in New Guinea. The post of Government Resident and Police Magistrate at Somerset and then Thursday Island was a significant one. Henry Chester occupied the post from 1875 to 1885, when he was succeeded by John Douglas, who remained in the office until his death in 1904. Part potentate, part policeman, part explorer of unknown parts, the Government Resident presided over Port Kennedy's polyglot population. Both Chester and Douglas played an important part in the controversial annexation and administration of colonial New Guinea after 1883, and the *Pilot* carried fulsome accounts of Douglas' activities – often contributed by Douglas - after its establishment in 1887. Indeed the newspaper was originally named the *Torres Straits Pilot and New Guinea Gazette*, only dropping the *New Guinea Gazette* sub-masthead in 1914.

Pearling commences

It was, however, the growth of the pearl shelling industry in and around the Strait from the 1860s onward that created a community large enough to sustain a weekly newspaper. Moreover, it was as the partisan chronicle of the conflicts between pearl shellers (and their supporters) and officials who sought to bring the rule of law to the frontier, and not as the relator of any external threats to the security of the frontier, that the *Torres Straits Pilot* secured its place as an invaluable source of much of what we need to know about the closing of the northern frontier. Given the current debate among public intellectuals about the destruction of Aboriginal society, and given that the *Pilot* does not feature as a primary source in the history of the northern frontier, the extant copies of the *Pilot* (1887-1914) assume a new significance.

According to Austin (1949: 228), F.C. (Fred) Hodel, who arrived on Thursday Island in 1887, was the original editor-publisher of the *Pilot*. Hodel ran a provisioning business and commission agency on Victoria Parade. As the 1899 advertisement in the *Pilot* illustrates, he also engaged in pearl-shelling and *beche de mer* fishing, and acted as agent for both the London Missionary Society in the Torres Strait, and Moravian missions at Mapoon and Weipa on the western coast of the Peninsula. Alexander Corran succeeded Hodel as editor-publisher in 1896, the year he arrived on Thursday Island and was still editor at the time of the 1909 judicial inquiry into child abuse at the Mapoon mission.

Commercial fishing of pearl shell had commenced in the Torres Strait in the late 1860s. Many of those engaged in pearl shelling during the 1870s and early 1880s came from Sydney. The first Queenslander to engage in pearl shelling, Frank Jardine, entered the industry in 1872. As an explorer, magistrate, pearl-sheller and cattle grazier, Frank Jardine, a son of Somerset founder John Jardine, and a resident of Somerset for over half a century, exercised a not inconsiderable influence on the development of the Torres Strait and Cape York Peninsula region. If the figure of John Douglas holds the spotlight from his visit as Premier in 1877 until his death in 1904, in seeking to bring peace and security to the region, then the figure of Frank Jardine (1841-1919) who arrived in 1867 and remained until his death in 1919, casts a long shadow. Contemporary accounts clearly show that Jardine was personally involved in the killing of Aborigines in the area on a number of occasions, (Byerley 1867). Moreover, while police magistrate responsible for enforcing the law relating to the employment of indigenous labour, it is unclear, because of his own involvement in the pearl-shelling industry, whether he was gamekeeper or chief poacher (Prideaux 1988).

To establish himself in the cattle industry in 1864, Jardine, accompanied by his brother Alick, performed the previously unaccomplished feat of droving a herd of cattle through country populated by tribal aborigines, from Einasleigh River, near Rockhampton, to Somerset. Although he retired from pearl shelling in 1892 to concentrate on the cattle industry, Jardine retained his association with the pearl shelling industry, acting as a Special Commissioner to the Government of Burma(h) in 1895, advising on matters pertaining to the Burmese pearl shelling industry.

For the pearl shell industry, the 1880s and 1890s were a period of growth and prosperity. The discovery in 1881 of the "Old Ground", a large shallow water area of previously untouched pearl shell extending some fifteen to thirty miles west of Badu (Mulgrave Island), north-north-west of Thursday Island, gave a tremendous impetus to the industry for some years. So rich was the Old Ground that one veteran sheller, James Clark, believed it to be inexhaustible. Clark, who

held extensive interests in pearl-shelling at Thursday Island and in Western Australia, and later in the Alroe Islands of the Dutch East Indies, informed the 1908 Royal Commission,

Some years ago I wrote some articles to the paper in which I stated that it is impossible to deplete the Old Ground, and I still hold that opinion... The weather itself provides all the protection that the beds need (Royal Commission 1908: 502).

The paper to which Clark refers – the *Torres Straits Pilot* – was not only a cheerleader for the pearling industry, but an important form of information currency within the industry. A more accurate, quantitative indication of the growth and development of the Torres Strait pearl shelling industry during the 1890s can be found in the following statistics collected by the Torres Straits Pearl-shellers Association. In 1890, the number of boats licensed to engage in pearl shelling was ninety-two. By 1900, this number had risen to 341. The quantity of shell collected increased from 630 tons in 1890 to 1212 tons in 1900, whilst the value of shell collected increased from £64,606 in 1890, to £125, 294 in 1900 (Royal Commission 1908: 748, Appendix XI).

The over-exploitation of the resource, so well described by Gartner (1994) led to a number of government inquiries into the sustainability of the fishery in the closing years of the nineteenth century and the first decade of the twentieth. In 1890 scientist William Saville-Kent was commissioned to inquire into the industry; a Queensland parliamentary commission made a report in 1897; Judge Dashwood made a report to the Commonwealth shortly after Federation in 1902, and in 1908 Queensland conducted a Royal Commission in the future of the pearl shelling industry, in particular on the use of white labour in the industry, given the newly legislated Commonwealth policy of White Australia. Each of these inquiries saw the *Pilot* advocate strongly for the industry. Indeed the paper was not only a cheerleader for the pearling industry, but an important form of information currency within the industry.

Thursday Island in the 1890s

The 1892 population return for Port Kennedy shows the Thursday Island population to be cosmopolitan and predominantly male. Some 582 persons, out of a total population of 1067 were European by nationality. The largest national groups represented amongst the non-Europeans component of the population were the Malays (90), the South Sea Islanders (61), Philippine Islanders (60), and the Chinese (50) (Douglas 1892:1030).

Many members of this last mentioned race were engaged in commercial activities. The return shows only 32 Japanese, of whom eleven were women, to be domiciled at Port Kennedy in 1892. A possible reason for this is that a number of Japanese may have lived on the shellers' stations built on the islands of the Torres Strait as shore bases for small boats working the reefs and shoals some distance from Thursday Island. Large scale maps drawn during the period show the location of a significant number of these shelling stations at Friday Island and Prince of Wales Island (Royal Commission 1908: 756). The aboriginal population of Port Kennedy numbered 82, making aborigines the third largest component of Thursday Island's population, after the Europeans and Malays (Douglas 1892:1030).

Of the adult Malay population of eighty-six, only eight were females; the Philippine Islands component of the population, sixty-one persons, was exclusively male; whilst of the fifty Chinese resident at Port Kennedy, only two were female; and of the Japanese population of thirty-two, eleven were females. In the European sector of the population there were 274 males, 123 females and 176 children. Of the eighty-two aborigines resident at Thursday Island, fifty were males, twenty-nine were females, and three were children. John Douglas reported, with some hyperbole, in 1892 that:

The seafaring people engaged afloat in the pearlshelling and *beche-de-mer* industries are recruited from almost every country under the sun. There is scarcely a nationality in Europe or Asia which is not represented. There are Negroes from Zanzibar and the Soudan, as well as creoles from Mauritius. From North America there are Negroes of the Southern States; and from South America there are Brazilians, Monte Videans and Chilians (Douglas 1892: 1030).

Yet within five years the racial mixture had changed dramatically. The 1897 Parliamentary Commission estimated that of the 1582 men employed in pearl-shelling in 1896, 511 were Japanese, 212 were 'Manila-men', 270 Malays, and 263 were Pacific Islanders. Fifty-one Europeans were engaged in the industry, as were some 275 men classified as "other races" (V&P 1897 Vol 2:1348). Of the 253 boats licensed to collect shell in 1896, the Japanese owned nineteen, whereas of the 272 licences issued, the Japanese held 134, although, as the accompanying illustration of an advertisement in the *Pilot* in 1905 demonstrates, the methods used in retaining Japanese divers were rather curious.

The exploitation of this polyglot pool of labour exercised the minds of the colonial government constantly. So on the northern frontier, the story of the last two decades of the nineteenth century was the story of increased regulation of the fishery – particularly of its labour recruitment practices among Torres Strait

Islanders, Pacific Islanders, Papuans, and the Aboriginal people of the Cape York Peninsula mainland, especially on the western side of the Cape. The Queensland Parliament's 1868 *Polynesian Labourers Act* was followed by the 1872 *Pacific Islanders Protection Act*, (an Act of the Imperial Parliament). Both were designed to stop the blackbirding of Pacific Islanders into Queensland sugar plantations, but also impacted on the fishery, as did the 1879 *Pearlshell and Beche-de-mer Fishery Act*, and its subsequent amendments over the ensuing years. This was followed by the 1884 *Native Labourers Protection Act*, an attempt by the Griffith Government to eliminate lawlessness on the northern frontier. It was not until the highly interventionist *Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act* of 1897, which provided for the isolation of Aboriginal people on designated reserves, that the recruitment abuses ceased, and the northern frontier was for all intents and purposes closed.

Critical times

The extant copies of the *Pilot* show it to be a vehement critic of the administration of the 1897 Act. This Act enabled the Protector, in this case the Northern Protector, Dr Walter Roth, to effectively remove aboriginal labour from the fishery. Consider the sentiments of this editorial 8 April 1898 - the year after the legislation was enacted:

The action of an aged and very paternal Government in putting a veto temporarily upon the engagement of mainland natives in the swimming-diving shell raising operations is already being felt by their would-be employers. It may be possible that their protector, Dr Roth, will see his way clear to permit them to help themselves and work for their living instead of letting them eat the bread of idleness at the expense of the colony's taxpayers...

It has been necessary, no doubt, in times gone by to protect the poor natives from some of the low-down employees who valued the life of a nigger at an exceedingly low estimate...but the days have gone by when they were ill-dealt with (*TSP*, 8 April, 1898).

The Government Resident, John Douglas was also attacked for his support of the Moravian mission, and on one occasion was the subject of an ill-deserved tirade of vituperation by *The Pilot*, which was critical of his handling of an alleged outrage by aborigines allegedly recruited from Mapoon (Bartlett 1954: 162-3).

Visits to Mapoon and Weipa in 1899, in the company of the Home Secretary, Justin Foxton, accompanied by Police Commissioner William Parry-Okeden, Dr Roth and missionary Nicholas Hey, on the Queensland Government steamer *White Star*, while fulsomely reported, did little to change Corran's attitude

towards Roth. However, Corran did praise the work of the missionaries saying,

Jibes may be uttered at the attempt to establish such missions as are being conducted by Mr. Hey at Mapoon, which has been under way for several years, and by Mr. Brown at Weipa, which has been commenced comparatively recently, yet to set the two side by side, the one against the other, and to personally note the distinct influence exercised over the Mapoon natives, after several years of mission work, as against the similar work only recently established at Weipa, is sufficient to silence completely those who proclaim the futility of such work...

Credit is undoubtedly due to those who are so successfully assisting in breaking down the antagonism naturally existing between the natives' barbarism and the white man's civilisation (*TSP*, 22 July, 1898).

Moreover, Corran obviously enjoyed the steamer cruise in July, the most hospitable time to visit the area, accompanied by the Minister, the Police Commissioner and the Northern Protector. "The whole of the journey across the [Albatross] bay reminded one of Mark Twain's *Life on the Mississippi*, Corran concluded, probably with unconscious irony, in the July 22, 1899 issue of the *Pilot*. Douglas was unaccountably absent from the party, apparently having essential business in the islands of the Strait to attend to.

Yet as late as 1903, five years after the passing of the Act, the *Pilot* pilloried Walter Roth, in an article which, a century later, suggests that a much more robust approach to the law of contempt prevailed at that time. Under the headline of "Notes and News" admixed with shipping news, notice of a meeting to form a local Chamber of Commerce, and a paragraph about the marriage of a Dr White and a Miss Beor –possibly Gilbert White, the Anglican bishop, the column carried the following:

Dr. Roth's carry out of the Aborigines Act is rigorous enough to earn him the reputation of a martinet. His prosecution of Roberts at Cooktown might perhaps be termed persecution; and the Home Secretary, if he sanctioned the procedure, is lending himself to as harsh a course as possible against *beche de mer* fishers, unworthy of his position (*TSP*, 21 March, 1903).

Roth's resignation in 1906 was attributed to his frustration at the campaign against him, and although Douglas' successor, Hugh Milman, was a veteran administrator who continued the policies of Douglas, Roth must have felt the loss of Douglas keenly. Indeed, it seems that there were occasions when improper use was made

of the columns of the *Pilot* in a campaign against Walter Roth, as this *mea culpa* from the paper on 24 March 1906 suggests:

...let it be fully understood that we have no personal motive nor any self-interest to serve in discussing the matter. Beyond a desire to procure a more equitable adjustment as between employer and employed, as between the straight, bona fide pearlsheller who has his all invested in the industry and the protector who wards the native interests, we have absolutely no personal interest to serve, no matter how much may be said to the contrary; nor have we the interests of any private individual or any one in particular to serve. It is regrettable that such a disavowal as this has to be made; but it appears to have lately been rendered necessary, because of the debased use to which the Press has been put in one or two instances locally- the use of the columns of the Press to serve personal or private ends, or to impute law and sordid motives for some apparently spiteful purpose. This kind of thing we aspire to avoid, knowing that in the face of what is true and right, no good can come of it (*TSP*, 24 March, 1906).

The eugenics debate

In the wake of the 1897 Act there was a widespread expectation that the Aboriginal people would die out. On the northern frontier there was a vigorous public debate about eugenics. Victorian notions of social Darwinism, popularised by Edmund Spencer, inevitably became part of the public debate in a place like Thursday Island, as missionaries like Nicholas Hey and administrators like Walter Roth pondered the prospects of the indigenous peoples of the region. Among such peoples were a substantial cohort of Pacific Islanders who has accompanied the maritime traders and the LMS missionaries from the western Pacific from as far back as the 1860s. In 1906 (June 30) a *Pilot* editorial mused:

It may come as news to most people that Mr. Hey, of the Mapoon mission, is somewhat perplexed regarding the large number of half-caste aboriginal girls now at the Mapoon industrial homes. Mr. Hey is reported to have recently said the only solution he sees is “marrying them to the full blooded natives as they attain maturity.” A leading resident on Thursday Island is also reported to have suggested marrying them to T. S. Island natives, there being a scarcity of women on the islands to provide wives for all the men. Mr. Hey has since stated that he fully concurs in the opinion that most of the island men would make better husbands. But Dr. Roth, whose opinion as Chief Protector of the Aborigines has undoubted influence, does not think it fair to marry educated half caste girls to blacks which might mean in many cases a return to camp life with its abuses, privations, and depravities. “If suitable islanders or half-castes could be

found for them,” the Chief Protector says, “which I doubt not, these girls would have an opportunity of making their influence for good felt, which would be a gain to the State.” Why not let them marry white men, if they can get the chance? The logic is that their influence for good may still be greater (*TSP*, 30 June, 1906)

Conclusion

As the voice of commerce in the Torres Strait, the *Pilot* was largely unchallenged during most of its fifty-five year history. The only competition to emerge was the short-lived *Torres Strait Pearler* published between 1905 and 1909 and reportedly owned by Fred Hodel, although this is not entirely clear (Austin 1949: 228; Royal Commission 1908: 539 and 556; Q.P.D. 1896 Vol LXXVI: 1809). The approach of the *Pearler* was reportedly different (Mullins, 1997). It supported the missionaries, it advocated a White Australia and, in politics, it backed the Labor Party. There are no known extant copies of the *Pearler* and despite the fact that there are no known extant copies after 1914, clippings of many stories from the *Pilot* and the *Pearler* do survive in manuscript collections, such as Presbyterian Mission archives held in the Mitchell Library (ML MSS 1893). In Box 3, Cutting Books I and II (1891-1919) are selected cuttings from the *Brisbane Courier*, *Daily Mail*, *Telegraph*; *Torres Strait Pilot* and *Torres Strait Pearler*. The *Torres Straits Pilot* ceased publication in 1942, - a victim of wartime newsprint shortages - when a new threat on the frontier was at its height.

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