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Growing up in the Pastoral Frontier: Conception, Birth and Childhood on Cattle Stations in the Northern Territory 1920 - 1950.
Continued in Recreation and Entertainment on Northern Territory Pastoral Stations, 1910 - 1950.

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INTRODUCTION

These papers were presented by Lyn Riddett in the State Library's 'Under the Banyan Tree' series of lunchtime entertainments in September 1989 and April 1990.

Lyn is a lecturer in history at the Northern Territory University, and has made a special study of the Top End cattle stations, particularly the contributions made by women. She has worked on Territory stations in various capacities ranging from cook to governess and so is in a unique position to speak about this extremely interesting but also extremely neglected aspect of the Territory's pastoral history.

Between 1970 and 1973, Lyn lived with tribal Aboriginal people at Daguragu (Wattle Creek) during the time of the land rights struggle at Wave Hill.
Growing up in the Pastoral Frontier

By

Lyn Riddett

Introduction

In the historiography of America and Australia the word 'frontier' is used to mean that area of the country to be last settled - the land furthest from the big cities. Americans pushed beyond their frontiers taking civilisation with them. They created new settlements and from those settlements cities grew and the frontier as a region receded and disappeared. The time of the American frontier was limited. Australians have had a different experience. In the north and north-west white settlers overlanded into a region which was the frontier. Not for them the pushing back and back of wilderness and the bringing to the fore the civilising impact of settler communities growing into towns and great cities of the plains. In the north and north-west the frontier with all the overtones of isolation, roughness, simplicity and fairly primitive existence, persisted well into the 20th century. Here the frontier has not been a line or a boundary to be reached and then pushed further away, here the frontier is a region spread over time where people live.

Frontier country, the pastoral frontier, has two major defining characteristics: place and time. In the Northern Territory the term is used to describe those regions where non-Aboriginal people brought cattle and sheep to set up and run a pastoral industry during the period 1870-1960. Of all the factors that may have operated on their decision to come, three stand out: explorers in the earlier part of the 19th century had praised the Northern Territory for its pastoral potential; the discovery of gold in the Kimberleys and around Pine Creek led people to believe that there would be a good local market for their cattle; finally there was a challenge which some of the early settlers had already experienced, which was to go into previously unsettled country, establish communities of Anglo-Saxon Celtic people and make the land productive. The last factor was reinforced by official policy of Australian colonial governments-populating the north and north-west remained a constant speck on the periphery of their visions about what constituted the ideal Australia. Colonial governments, and in the 20th century the Commonwealth Government, while never actually dedicating much energy to this aspect of their vision, did not give up hoping the north might eventually flourish. From time to time between 1870 and 1960 they even put some money and what little expertise could be mustered into dealing with northern development.

The Northern Territory pastoral frontier did not change very much between the 1870s and the 1960s. Gradual improvements in the areas of cattle management, transport and communication, health and education service delivery, and industrial relations are a feature of the post World War II period. The 1960s with beef roads, development bank loans, rotary drills and mobile health services is the first decade of noticeable change. Before that, a family beginning to develop a run in say the 1950s might find themselves experiencing precisely the same kinds of problems and facing the same hardships as a family starting up in the 1910s or the 1930s. The exception being that there had been a dramatic improvement during the '20s and '30s in the areas of material and infant welfare.

This paper will examine the period from the beginning of the 1920s to a point somewhere in the middle of the 1950s. The Victoria River District will be the main focus but some reference will be made to the Barkly Tablelands and Gulf Districts. In it I will examine aspects of birth, early childhood, adolescence, that is the period from 0 to 18 years. The paper will consider factors affecting this period of people's lives as follows: health; education; socialisation; as well as economic and political factors. At the end of the paper, I shall reflect on the consequences of conception from the aspect of race relations. As far as it is possible the paper will look at the lives of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children.
Being Born

Up until the late 1920s children would most often be born at home, the mother being attended by a midwife. European women often died in childbirth and the surviving infant might be raised by an older sibling or relatives. Mother and baby sometimes both died and sometimes the mother survived and the baby died. The population of non-Aborigines was so small that any birth of a non-Aboriginal child was a very noteworthy event and any death was a tragic reminder of the fragile grip Europeans had on the harsh country of the north. Some European women, however, had to make do with no assistance during childbirth. Social barriers between the races were strong and only rarely would an Aboriginal woman be close enough to a white woman to offer help and comfort during the white woman's confinement. Stories from three families who lived in the 1920s can illustrate this. Sarah Feeney, Sarah Fogarty and Maude Cockburn-Campbell were all young women then, mothers already and about to have another child. Sarah Feeney was perhaps the best off: she had her mother close by and when she realised she was pregnant with her third child she went back to Pine Creek for her confinement:

SF: Yes it would have been 1920. Because on the road out, I got pregnant. And of course, I had to come back to Pine Creek. I'd have stopped there if I could've, you know, but he wouldn't let me stay - there was nobody to look after me, anyway. So I came back to Pine Creek. Moray, the stock inspector for Vesteys, he brought me in. We got as far as what they call the Camp Oven Creek and the car broke down. There were some blacks nearby and he sent one of them back to Willeroo, got a buggy and horses and brought us into Manbullo. I caught the train and came down to Pine Creek, to mother . . .

INT: From Manbullo?

SF: Yes, and that was where Grace was born. Then she was 4 weeks old and the motor car was running and we had a driver then. He picked me up at Katherine and took me out with this 4-weeks-old baby. We got stuck in the Victoria River and oh, it was hot! I had Nancy, Bill and this baby-my goodness, the heat was terrific. I didn't know what to do, where to put her.

1NT: What time of the year was it, do you remember?

SF: October 1921. I kept wetting nappies and fanning her with them. Well, eventually he got it out-he had to winch it out. He wasn't well, he had a touch of fever so he laid down on the bank of the river for a long time to try and get a bit of strength back. Anyway, we gradually got going and we got to Victoria River Downs: there was nobody more pleased than I was to get to Victoria River Downs!¹

Just two years later Sarah Fogarty gave birth to her fourth child at Delamere Station. Sarah's problem was that although she and her husband had arranged for one of the Australian Inland Mission sisters to come and stay during Sarah's confinement, the baby arrived a month early. It is likely that Sarah had inadvertently induced the early labour by taking too much quinine while dispensing the anti-malarial treatment to her family. Ted Fogarty, Sarah's husband, took off to collect the AIM sister from Wimmera Home on VRD Station, but before he had completed the round trip of 190 or so kilometres Young Ted had been born. Sarah had delivered him without any assistance.²

Maude Cockburn-Campbell died giving birth to her fourth child at Waterloo Station in February 1926. She had a difficult pregnancy and, exhausted by heat and privation, was too ill to be helped by the doctor fetched from Wyndham nearly 350 km away.³

Loss of a child could be a compelling reason for going away for the birth of a subsequent baby. Ruby Roney lost her first child in 1917 and when she was pregnant with her second she made the long voyage south to Sydney so as to be close to family and medical
assistance. In her interview for the Northern Territory Archives Ruby told the story of the death of another baby.

In 1935 or so, as far as I can remember, we lived in Katherine then and our friends, the Hoffmans (he was in the Police Force) lived at Maranboy. They had two little boys and Mrs Hoffman was having another baby so she came in from Maranboy, some weeks before the baby was due, and stayed with us. Well the day came when she had to go to the hospital. We took her up early one morning and there was no telephones or anything in those days. In the afternoon, late in the afternoon, I sent one of my boys up to see how things were, but she was still the same; the baby hadn't arrived. Well the next morning early, I sent one of the boys up again to see how she was and he came galloping back to tell me that Mrs Hoffman was alright but the baby wasn't and sister said to come up there as soon as I could. So I hurried around and got up to the hospital. Before I went inside, I was in the gate, I could hear the baby crying. When I got in, I saw the baby, a lovely big baby boy, his head all bound up with bandages and all the bandages had blood coming from them and he was at his mother's breast but he was only whimpering all the time. Well that poor little baby, during the night Doctor Fenton and Sister Wunsch were there, doctor had to use instruments and at that time there was no electricity or anything like that in Katherine and they only had a Tilley lamp and apparently just at the crucial moment, the Tilley lamp went out and they were left in the dark. Well things were very bad. Well the baby's head was not good and he died. He lived for 36 hours whimpering all the time, and then the poor little soul passed away. It was very sad.

Well then, I don't know how this came about, but my husband and I and another man got permission to bury the little baby, little Lawrence John Hoffman. So we buried the little baby and before we could complete the job, a terrific storm arose up and it poured raining, but finally we finished the job and got the poor little fellow buried and now if you ever get to Katherine, you'll see in the cemetery there, there's a tombstone, Lawrence John Hoffman, or John Lawrence, I forget which way it goes.4

The death of women during childbirth, and the death of babies, had been a factor in the AIM decision to develop a nursing service for people in the outback. Nursing sisters trained as general nurses and as midwives went to staff the AIM hospitals for two years at a time. By the time Sarah Feeney was due to have her fourth child the AIM had just opened the Wimmera Home on VRD. Her baby, Sarah, was the first child to be born there in 1923 and was delivered by the same Sister King who did not quite make it to Delamere Station in time for Ted Fogarty Junior's arrival in August the same year.5

A feature of these stories is that in the case of Sarah Fogarty and Maude Cockburn-Campbell they are being told many years later by children, now adults, who were present when a young sibling was being born. Sarah Feeney's daughter, Grace, while not present when her sister was being born, came to the AIM hospital shortly after and stayed with her mother and the baby for the two-week period of Sarah's lying in. In these, and many of the frontier families, children were incorporated into the birthing process of their siblings. They were, then, not only aware of what was going on, they were part of the process. Aboriginal families following traditional practices would have restricted the access of men and young boys, for in their society birthing is a woman's business. The women would have had excellent midwifery support from other women.

Between 1923 and 1939, when the Wimmera Home closed, the AIM sisters recorded only one case where they were called out to assist an Aboriginal woman and in that case they responded to a call from a worried manager of an outstation. By the time the sister arrived to assist, the baby, a breach birth, had been delivered by Aboriginal women who were reluctant to discuss the case in any detail.6
Infancy and Early Childhood

This was a time of strain for many young white mothers, particularly if the new baby was what the nursing sisters called a ‘difficult feeder’. Heat and tiredness sometimes combined to make it very hard for the new mother to establish lactation and until the late 1930s when powdered milk appeared in the outback, finding a means of supplementing breast milk was often very tricky. Nestles condensed milk was used in an emergency.7

Aboriginal women would wet-nurse for another’s baby. Anecdotal evidence suggests that at least in one case in the late 1930s an Aboriginal woman wet-nursed for a white missus on one of the Vesteys’ stations.8 Where this kind of help was not available, and the situation mentioned here seems to have been quite unusual, then white women had to use cow’s milk if it was available and when it was not then goat’s milk could be used. In neither case was there a ready supply because cow’s milk was scarce and goat’s milk often unpalatable because goats indiscriminately feed on anything. Sarah Feeney remembered goats being used on VRD Station but the milk being undrinkable because the goats fed on Leichhardt pine which is bitter.9

Childhood illnesses and accidents were another source of tribulation for pastoral families especially in the earlier part of the period we are examining. The white families had to deal with ailments not commonly suffered in city communities and with the fear of not being able to provide the kind of treatment which might be available in more closely settled areas.

A serious accident to a toddler or young child brought not only pain for the victim, distress for the family confronted with the problem of getting the victim treated, but sometimes quite serious disruptions to family unity. Seriously ill or badly hurt children were often evacuated to hospital in Darwin or even to cities in the south. They often travelled alone or were left alone in hospital if they had been lucky enough to be accompanied by a family member during evacuation.

The station diary for VRD gives us an idea of some of Mrs Graham’s trials during the early 1920s before the AIM hospital opened:

26/05/20 - Little Robert seriously ill now.

30/05/20 - Robert improving but baby ill now.

01/06/20 - Kathleen laid up with sore eyes.

02/06/20 - Mullally started work to look after store and milk etc. Owing to children's illness Kathleen had to relinquish same.

03/06/20 - Kathleen confined to her room with sore eyes. Robert and baby allowed on verandah in the sun for a few hours.

04/06/20 - Influenza raging here nearly a fortnight-now shows signs of abating.

08/06/20 - Kathleen's eyes improving.10

Mrs Johnston had to rush her badly injured daughter from Alexandria Station to medical treatment in Camooweal.

My little girl was burnt very badly on Alexandria and we had to take her into Camooweal 140 miles [225 km] by car and I thought that she was going to die all the way in. That was before the flying doctor. Pat was about two when that happened wasn’t she? That would have been ‘30.11
In 1937 the Reverend Chris Goy, a travelling AIM parson, helped the Gorey family out in the following way as he and his wife motored from Inverway Station to Wave Hill.

We went off the track to visit a family who lived in a boring camp. The youngest son had fallen off the rigging and broken his leg a few days previously. Dr Fenton flew out and took him to the Katherine Hospital. Mrs Gorie (sic) was naturally anxious about her son and expressed a wish that she might catch the mail car at Wave Hill to take her to Katherine. I volunteered to take her to Wave Hill (97 miles) [156 km] and she jumped at the opportunity.\textsuperscript{12}

But as the VRD Station diary shows, by the 1950s some of this burden had been eased by the provision of mobile health clinics, the Aerial Medical Service and improved communication and transport. The introduction of programs to vaccinate children against diphtheria, the Mantoux test for TB and accompanying vaccination program, and later the Salk vaccine, would have all helped raise health standards on pastoral properties. Penicillin, and in the late 1950s antibiotic medicines, helped considerably to contain infection, so that while the risk of accident may not have diminished, the capacity to help the patient increased. A better understanding of preventative medicine also contributed to improved conditions.

**Schooling**

The 1950s saw the beginning of quite a marked improvement in the delivery of education to children on pastoral properties, but until the 1960s schooling was the prerogative of white children in all but one or two exceptional cases. Education, of course, is never restricted to what occurs in the classroom and the period of education, or socialisation, to enable children to meet the requirements of their culture began for both white and Aboriginal children at around the age of five years.

By this age young Aboriginal girls might well have become responsible for a large part of the daily care of younger siblings who would accompany them as they went about their business. On family trips from the station camp to bush camps girls and boys would be instructed in tracking and foraging skills. During the companionable suppertime hour at dusk, children might join in informal song and dance sessions. Through participation in these regular and often daily occurrences and in the longer and formal song and dance cycles at the year’s end, Aboriginal children learnt what was required of them to become full members of their society.

European children ‘went to school’. School could be anywhere and teacher might be an older sister or brother, or mother. Most children stayed with their families during the early school years and going away south to boarding school was reserved for the secondary school years.

Mrs Gorey worked with her husband as an offsider in his drilling camp. Her job was to cook for the men in the camp. In between this day-long task she taught her children their lessons.

Money earned from cooking was set aside to send the big ones away to school. When one of the big ones, Alice, came back from school in 1936 (aged 16) she took over two jobs: goat-herding and teaching. Alice helped out in this way until her marriage in 1937 to Peter Sinclair, the wireless operator based at Wave Hill.

The Goreys lived as a small community in the dry waterless and practically treeless plains in the black soil country between Wave Hill and Inverway Stations. As drilling rigs are there to find subterranean water, they are usually to be found where there is no surface water so there were few trees. School would be held in the meagre shade of a solitary bloodwood.
Dust was everywhere. In the hot days of the late year before the rains came, dust storms would have been common. Teaching and learning required commitment and endurance.

Some children were supervised by governesses, often untrained but willing enthusiasts, who came to the bush out of a sense of adventure. Such was Nat Walker (nee Gurr) who went to VRD in 1948 to teach the white children there. There were two children, Pam and Robin Magnussen, whose father managed VRD and two others, Lurline and Bill Norton, whose parents were head stockmen on Montijinnie, an outstation 100 km away from the main station. Lurline and Bill lived at VRD with Nat. These four youngsters were in primary school. An older boy Alex, whose father was a carpenter on VRD, was in high school.

NW: He was doing high school and I found that a bit difficult. So if he asked me anything I didn't know I'd just say 'Look I'm busy for a moment Alex' and I'd go and look it up. Then I'd come back and tell him, you know, what-I didn't say to him 'I don't know what you're talking about.' But otherwise I got on very well.

A school day began early in the morning cool and was often over by lunchtime. Afternoons were not free in the sense we might understand it, because the children frequently had chores. Some worked at adult tasks as well. Even the formal school hours might be interrupted.

NW: There was a big rain-I don't know how many inches- ...anyway, I was so amazed in the school, the children all off with their clothes, everything, except their pants, out they all went and were turning somersaults in the mud and muck-I was in the middle of teaching them...Yes, no by your leave or anything, just off and turning somersaults. Pam she had beautiful blonde hair, pretty little girl she was and they were all just covered in mud and I couldn't get over this, you know...the rain (so pleased to see the rain) yes. No by-your leave or anything.

Beryl Spreadborough spent a few years on Delamere Station in the 1950s while her father Wray Findlay was managing the place. She and her brother had a governess but she remembers 'We'd tell the governess dad wanted us and we'd tell dad it was a holiday. So we'd spend a lot of time in the saddle'.

The Johnston children were not quite so lucky when Mrs Mundle came to teach them:

Mrs Mundle was a qualified teacher but she'd been married and her husband had been killed out of an aeroplane and we were lucky to get her, because she made them do their lessons in the time, not let them go on for hours. The other little girl that we had, she was too soft with them, she was like one of themselves. We only had them for a year, we only kept them a year-they'd only stay a year. We had to pay their expenses. Mrs Mundle stayed two years because in the Christmas holiday she did a trip to Thursday Island instead of going back to Brisbane.

After a few years of primary schooling the children of more affluent families usually went away to complete their education. At the end of high school, sometimes after only three years, they came back to work on the station. Kevin Graham, aged seventeen, came to join his family on VRD in 1921 after three years at Nudgee College in Brisbane. By the time he was twenty-one he had the responsibility of a stock camp at the Mullahloot outstation.

In this period of middle adolescence the ties that might have been made earlier between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children were broken. Many white children had a good time when small, sharing in the communal life of the Aboriginal camp, learning tracking skills, to identify bush tucker, and sometimes language. This was the experience of the Fogarty children while they were on Hodgson Downs Station south-east of Katherine in the 20s.
The Findlay children enjoyed a similar relationship with Aborigines on Delamere in the 1950s:

_They [the Aborigines] took to my little brother. He'd go down when they were having a corroboree. He learned to play the didgeridoo... my brother and I had a blackfella each-he used to look after us when we went out riding-they made sure we were kept well out of any charging stuff [cattle]...they taught us to eat gooseberries and wild bananas-and under bloodwoods you get a nut with a worm, a little white worm, very sweet tasting- we tasted goanna cooked in the coals and witchetty grubs._

The Johnston family took a sterner view of such relationships but did not prevent them altogether.

**INT:** In your family life on the station, what attitudes did you try to instil in your children?

**EJ:** Right from wrong, to start with. They were badly influenced by the blacks, you can imagine that. So we had to keep them balanced.

**INT:** And what did that involve?

**EJ:** Well, we had to tell them that they weren't black, that they were white and they had to be like little white children, not like little black children.

**INT:** What sort of things did they do until you...

**EJ:** Oh, well, they'd hunt with the blacks, you know, and do all that kind of thing. Well, once we got a governess they were in school all day. They were only little before...

**CJ:** They'd sneak away to the back of the woodheap and eat bones, all sorts of things.

**EJ:** They used to eat anything the blacks would give them.

**CJ:** Oh yes!

**INT:** They killed animals did they?

**EJ:** Oh, you know, little lizards. The black kids... they'd bring them home in matchboxes. You know, we used to get the matches in tin matchboxes in those days. They'd come home with these tiny little lizards in these matchboxes. Frogs in bottles. You can imagine....

**CJ:** Really black they were. That's what they were growing up with, until we...

**INT:** Did they have any adventures with snakes?

**EJ:** Oh, the blacks would kill them as soon as they saw them. They'd protect the kids, you know. They knew when anything wrong was about.

**CJ:** Oh they were good with children! 

The whole of the lives of people on the pastoral stations was dominated by the economic requirements of the industry. Everyone, adults and children, had to contribute in some way to the running of the station. Some young boys were not sent away to school as Kevin Graham had been. The Grahams left VRD Station when Mrs Graham died and the young men of the Martin family who came in the Grahams' place completed their schooling at the station under their mother's supervision. Like Kevin they were out working in stock camps by their mid teens. By their late teens or early twenties they would have had full responsibility for a stock camp of eight to ten men or an outstation.
Young men, both European and Aboriginal, grew up knowing they would become ringers, stockmen, perhaps head stockmen or overseers. Sometimes they started out by learning to herd the station dairy cows or nanny goats. Jack Sullivan, an Aboriginal who grew up in the East Kimberley-Western Victoria River District area, says that when he was a snipe he often looked after the cows and nanny goats for the Duracks on Argyle or Bulla Stations. When he grew up he started cattle work.23

On some stations young boys were taught to ride by being placed on a quiet pony when they were still very young. Grant Ngabidj learnt riding that way when he was on Auvergne.24 Mandi, a countryman of Grant's, was not so fortunate. His teacher had a simple and more brutal approach. Jim Chrisp, head stockman on Ivanhoe Station, put a young boy on a horse and if the boy fell off Chrisp hit him and made him get back on again. Mandi responded by taking himself off somewhere out of Chrisp's reach so he could learn without being whipped. He learned quickly.25

Ted and Dave Fogarty, growing up in the 1920s and '30s, had before them the example of their father's ability as a horse and cattle man. When Dave suffered terrible injuries to his leg during a motoring accident in 1928 one of Sarah Fogarty's main concerns was that her nine-year-old son's life would be ruined if he could not be healed. He was after all a man and men in those places worked cattle. His injury was so bad that one doctor recommended amputation! The horror of raising a male child who would not be able to do bush work, and Dave's own fear of the same, pushed Sarah to find a way of taking her son by ship around three-quarters of the length of the length of the coast of Australia, Derby to Brisbane, so he could receive medical treatment.26

Young Ted Fogarty left school at about age 13 years.

_He didn't really want to continue and his mother didn't want him to leave. But he told her all he wanted was to be a stockman. So Sarah made the decision to send her son out bush with an old friend, where she knew he would be safe, looked after and become a man._27

But the boss he went to was brutal in the way men often were in the pastoral industry. Ted's niece, Pearl Ogden recounts a terrible incident involving Ted (aged 14 years) and his boss Tommy Mathews in her book *Leg's More Sweeter than Tail.*

One time they took a mob of spayed cows from Go Go Station into Wyndham over what was called the New Stock Route, over the Pentecost Range, past the Scotty Salmon Gorge, over a range called New York, 80-100 km out of Wyndham, where the pumping station was. Mathews thought he was going to make a new stock route. They got the cattle onto the top of the range, which was very steep, and the cattle wouldn't go down the other side. They spread all along the top, but wouldn't go over and down the other side. Tommy told Ted to go ahead and find feed for the horses, but there was no feed for miles, only spinifex. Because Ted couldn't find any feed, he got bashed.

Later at night, about 9-10 pm, Ted heard his companions singing out so he went back to help. After a while he realised that everyone had left and gone back to the camp and that he was alone with the cattle. It had been a long day. He hadn't eaten since breakfast and he was tired and decided to roll rocks down the hill in an effort to entice the cattle down. They were on ledges and just wouldn't go down any further. Unfortunately, Tommy Mathews came up and caught him. He really got a bashing that night for all his trouble and effort, then Tommy sent him back to get the horses, while the others took over.

Ted said, 'You must never cry, you'd just get more'. If you sulked or showed any emotion, he'd just keep hitting you. If you hadn't forgotten it five minutes later, you'd get it again. One time he grabbed me by the front of the shirt and punched me in the face and said 'Now
Adulthood responsibilities came early for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal adolescents. At about the age young Ted was learning to be a man in the pastoral industry Aboriginal boys would be progressing into the first formal stages of their initiation into their law and Aboriginal girls beginning their shift into marriage and motherhood. Aboriginal and European began to live separately and companions of childhood sometimes became estranged during this transition period. Occasionally friendships endured and Maude Cockburn-Campbell retained the companionship of her Aboriginal friend, Alice, who stayed by Maude until her tragic death in 1926. But this was a rare situation. On the whole most young white men became bosses and young girls (who also often married young, as young as 16 or 17 years) the missus.

Conception

In this, the last section, I want to turn to the beginnings of life because so much of what could happen to an infant, a child, an adolescent, was affected by the social status and race of the parents. In a society dominated by the economic superstructure of the pastoral industry it is not surprising that, in the Victoria River District where the large UK companies Vesteys and Bovril monopolised pastoral lands, those companies also dominated social relations.

Vesteys and Bovril employed men and used the labour of the women who came with the men, or who were there already as traditional owners of the country. A child's life was therefore regulated to a very large degree by the position its father held in the company hierarchy. If the father was Aboriginal and the mother also Aboriginal then the matter was clear cut: life was spent learning the two ways, white and black and status in Aboriginal law was probably one's main achievement in life. Competence in aspects of cattle management was a secondary but still important goal. During the 1930s and 1940s, however, it is possible that Aboriginal families on some Vesteys' stations, particularly Birrindudu and Waterloo, responded to the brutality and deprivation of Vesteys' management policies by not having children! Their plight was compounded by depressed living conditions. The situation was so bad that Vesteys themselves, becoming alarmed by the fall in the numbers of potential employees, hired two anthropologists to investigate. Ronald and Catherine Berndt published their findings nearly 40 years later in End of An Era. While they did not conclude that the fall in Aboriginal births was due to a conscious decision made by Aborigines, Ted Evans in his patrol reports from the same area in the late 1940s raises that question. Evans, perhaps not confidently, concluded that the low birth rate was not the result of conscious action, but by raising the possibility Evans in effect left the question open.

At the same time another set of factors operated which caused disruption to the lives of children born in the district, (as elsewhere in the Northern Territory). Firstly it needs to be said that children of white parents could have their lives disrupted if the father had a dispute with company management, retired or died. As the family's tenure on a station depended almost always on the father's employment - these were in the main not owner-managed stations- when something happened to terminate the employment the family had to leave the station.

Aboriginal children conceived of an Aboriginal mother and a non-Aboriginal father suffered an even greater disruption. Increasingly through the period from the 1930s as governments became firmer in their purpose of separating part-Aboriginal children from their mothers, more and more of these children were removed from pastoral stations and institutionalised hundreds of kilometres away. In the last few years there have been a number of studies which have described the effect this practice had on the children, their families and the communities they were taken from. Work by historians like Tony Austin and Julie Wells has
complemented studies undertaken by Barbara Cummings and other Aboriginal women.\textsuperscript{32} In my work on the Victoria River District I focused on the bureaucratic structures which compelled patrol officers to engage in a practice that they often found repugnant-forcibly separating children from their families.\textsuperscript{33}

This aspect of growing up in the pastoral frontier must stand as the worst feature of what was often a hard and physically rigorous life. The wonder of it all is the way in which adults who experienced growing up in the pastoral frontier have recounted their stories with such enjoyment. Their stories ring with a sound of achievement. Perhaps they feel too, as their parents did, that a challenge was worth the taking. Or is it that the myth of frontier is still so pervasive that for the moment it is the only valid way people have of expressing their experiences?

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21. NTA NTRS 226 TS 250, p64
22. NTA NTRS 226 TS 221 p21
26. Ogden, P op cit p46
27. ibid p59
28. ibid p60
30. AA CRS F1 53/352, \textit{Patrol Officer Reports}

33. See Riddett, LA, op cit Chs 8-9