THE GO–BETWEENS:
THE ORIGINS OF THE PATROL
OFFICER SERVICE IN THE
NORTHERN TERRITORY

by

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State Library of the Northern Territory

Darwin 1992
Cataloguing-in-publication data supplied by the State Library of the Northern Territory.

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Occasional papers; no. 31

ISBN 0 7245 0701 9
ISSN 0817–2927

i. State Library of the Northern Territory
ii. Title
iii. Series (Occasional papers (State Library of the Northern Territory); no. 31).

305.89915
354.9429

(The views expressed in this publication do not necessarily represent those of the publisher)
OCCASIONAL PAPERS

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15. (Withdrawn).
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INTRODUCTION

This paper was presented by Jeremy Long in the State Library's 'Under the Banyan Tree' series of lunchtime entertainments in April 1988.

Jeremy ended a distinguished career with the Commonwealth public service when he retired recently from the position of Commissioner for Community Relations. Prior to that he was one of the most senior officers in the Department of Aboriginal Affairs. His earlier postings in the Northern Territory included that of patrol officer, and, for a time in 1955, personal assistant to the Northern Territory Director, Mr Harry Giese.

Since his retirement Jeremy has returned to academia to research the history of the Territory's patrol officer service. Thus we see a coming together of the two streams, academic research joining up with personal knowledge and experience. A history of the patrol officer service is long overdue, and I can think of no-one better qualified to do justice to this small, dedicated band of men, whose efforts it is today fashionable to belittle. Perhaps their greatest accolade is the sincere and lasting friendship and trust that still exists between them and their former "charges".
I have begun researching the patrol officer service, initially of the Native Affairs Branch which later became the Welfare Branch of the Northern Territory Administration, and that is what this talk is about. I came up with the title, "The Go–Betweens", and I think I am stuck with that until I can think of a better one to describe the position, the function, of the men who were recruited as patrol officers to work in the Territory with Aboriginal people.

Why am I researching this subject? I guess it has something to do with the fact that I was once, very briefly, one of those people myself. Another thing is that there are still a number of former patrol officers about to whom you can talk and find out something of how they saw their work. I was trained as an historian, and am probably happiest poring over documents, but there is clearly a lot to be said for talking to people and finding out, by word of mouth, something more than documents ever tell you about what really happened.

This kind of study is part of a changing, in fact constantly changing, process of reassessing the past, in this particular instance the past being the history of government relations with Aboriginal Australians. With the passing of time our concept of the past changes. In recent years there has been a new interest in what we sometimes used to think of as pretty bad old days.

We used to think that there was room for improvement, but today both Aboriginal people and others are looking at the more recent past from a fresh perspective, and are drawing new conclusions. I suppose it has always been a disappointing story, but, and this is one of the emphases in recent research, one of good intentions too. As Justice Blackburn pointed out when he was writing his judgement on the celebrated Gove Land Case, looking at the documents there is a consistent record, a consistent thread passing through them of good intentions on the part of government, from the time that Governor Phillip was given his instructions and sought to carry them out, right up to the present time. And yet, despite good intentions, there is a pretty sorry story of failure and lack of achievement in many of those areas.

The story of the patrol officers starts with an absence of people like patrol officers, an absence in the Territory, and elsewhere in Australia, of specialised trained workers dealing with Aboriginal people. The first moves to do something about this, to set up a different method of dealing with Aboriginal people, came in the 1930s. As it has so often happened in the course of the history of government dealings with Aborigines, the sequence goes something like this: scandals in the North, followed by alarm in the southern capitals about stories of what was going on "up North". Thus events in Cape York alarmed the growing and increasingly prosperous populations in Sydney and Melbourne in the 1880s, and led to new initiatives in dealing with Aboriginal people, including the introduction of legislation to control and improve the situation.
In the 1920s and 1930s, it was alarm about what was happening in Central Australia, in Arnhem Land, and further west around the Fitzmaurice. Reports of incidents involving conflict between Aboriginal and other people, reports of mistreatment and ill-treatment of Aborigines, sometimes reports of actual or contemplated police action to deal with disorder and killings by Aboriginal people, produce the response that "something ought to be done". This results in pressure on governments, governments are embarrassed, questions are asked in London, as well as in Sydney, Melbourne and other cities. Particularly, pressure on the Federal Government.

One of the notions that seemed to emerge in the 1930s was the notion that something might be learnt from what Australia was doing in Papua New Guinea. After World War 1, the former German New Guinea was handed over to Australia by the League of Nations as the mandated Territory of New Guinea, and Australia established the patrol officer, or field officer service there. One of the important aspects of the New Guinea patrol officer service was that all recruits were given a course of training, which included, as a major component, anthropology, together with certain other subjects. This training was carried out at the University of Sydney, and the Department of Anthropology at Sydney University was, to a large extent, established in order to train patrol officers for New Guinea.

Down in Papua, where Australia had been rather a longer time, there was a similar tradition of field officers and patrol officers, but here there was rather less interest in training them, the notion being that the best training was on the job. This is an interesting contrast in the two traditions of Papua and of New Guinea, which later of course merged in the post-war period.

It was felt that the New Guinea patrol officer service had many parallels with the Northern Territory situation. It is very clear, looking at the documents, that the model for the Northern Territory patrol officer service was New Guinea. The Northern Territory duty statements drew directly on those of the New Guinea patrol officers, fiddling with the words a bit, and changing "New Guinea" to "Northern Territory".

The first time this was done was in response to the celebrated killings in Eastern Arnhem Land in 1932/33. A young anthropologist called Donald Thomson, who had been working in Cape York for a couple a years, in effect volunteered his services, or was volunteered to the Government by the Vice Chancellor of the University of Sydney, with the recommendation that this was the man needed to sort things out in Arnhem Land. The public was outraged at the prospect of a punitive expedition to do something about the Aborigines who had killed 5 Japanese working on trepang luggers at Caledon Bay. By then a peace mission was already on its way, and the government was able to say that things were under control, the missionaries were going out, and there was no need for the services of Donald Thomson. However, the pressure was kept up from Melbourne, the Attorney General and the Prime Minister received letters from University professors strongly recommending Thomson, and a very effective campaign was waged in the press, particularly by the Melbourne Herald, which chastised the government for refusing to utilise the service of the man (Thomson) who could solve all these problems.

So in due course in August 1934 the Minister for the Interior announced that there was a vacancy for the position of patrol officer, Arnhem Land, and that Mr Thomson was being appointed. As far as I can tell there had never been any talk of any such position before,
but there was now a vacancy and Thomson was to be appointed. However, this never happened. Thomson should have been the first patrol officer but he did not like the idea of being merely a patrol officer, of being a Protector responsible to the Chief Protector, Dr Cook, the Medical Officer who was also in charge of the Aboriginals Department. Thomson wanted to work directly to the Minister in Canberra, he wanted a rather different commission, and there was talk of appointing him as a special magistrate. (This again draws an interesting parallel with New Guinea, where the patrol officers and district officers had magisterial functions and responsibilities).

No-one seemed to like this idea too much, so Thomson ended up coming to Amhem Land with a special commission rather than as a patrol officer. His instructions covered areas such as acquainting Aborigines of the seriousness of killing people. He was to generally impose a sort of peace, to introduce the local inhabitants to the notion of law and order and the fact that things had changed from traditional times, to make it clear that killing and other serious crimes would not be tolerated any more. That was one element of his commission. Another element was the gathering of information. One of the main functions of field officers in New Guinea was to take censuses, to report on where people were, (one reason for this of course was so that they could be taxed), and they also had the functions of explorers. As well as pacifying the frontier, they mapped it – marked physical features such as rivers and mountain ranges, and showed where native villages were located.

Thomson spent a couple of years in Arnhem Land, but while he was still there similar pressures forced the government to set up a Board of Inquiry in relation to two incidents in Central Australia. Both involved a policeman, who was accused (with his trackers) of perpetrating violent acts against Aborigines, and of shooting an escaping prisoner at Ayers Rock. A Board of Inquiry was set up headed by another university academic, a professor from Adelaide University, and one of the other members of the Board was an officer of the Northern Territory Administration from the Aboriginal Welfare Branch, Mr Vin White. The Inquiry called on the services of a Central Australian researcher from Adelaide University, Ted Strehlow, who knew at least one of the relevant languages fluently, having being born and bred at Hermannsburg, the son of a missionary.

It is clear that the Board was impressed with the help received from Ted Strehlow and reported accordingly. One of the recommendations made by the Board was that a patrol officer should be appointed to conduct patrols into the large south–west reserve where some of the incidents involving police occurred, and that police patrols into this area should cease. Incidentally, the Board found some of the allegations about beatings of Aborigines were unsubstantiated, but that one incident certainly had occurred – an alleged flogging at Hermannsburg, apparently at the request of one of the missionaries, of a recalcitrant Aboriginal person. The recommendation in this case was merely that this sort of thing should not occur any more. As to the Ayers Rock incident, this was found to be justified, shooting an escaping prisoner was found to be legally justified but undesirable. Instructions were then given to police to avoid, if possible, the shooting of escaping prisoners.

There were a number of recommendations made, but a number of them focused on the desirability of appointing a specialist patrol officer. The description of the type of person required for this position might have been written in order to fit Ted Strehlow. In due course the position was approved by the Minister and offered to Strehlow, so he is actually the first patrol officer.
It is interesting that, after these incidents in the 1930s, there was a direct recommendation from the Central Australian Inquiry that there should be no police prosecution of any Aborigines for visiting violence on other Aborigines, except with the approval of the Chief Protector. This is interesting in the light of the current interest in Aboriginal customary law and how it might be fitted into Australian law.

During this period it had become quite commonplace that such killings were not investigated at all, through being too far away, and there being not enough people. For instance, a missionary at Groote Eylandt might report that people had been killed, and that really something should be done about it, but as it was extraordinarily difficult to get out to Groote eventually after a period of months a constable from Roper might get over and bring in a few people. In later years the investigations might be done by patrol officers alone and this resulted in a type of extra-judicial arrangement whereby, under the legislation, an Aboriginal man responsible for killing another Aboriginal person might be removed for a year to another reserve, and the matter would not even get to the courts. This was simply action taken to restore the peace and avoid further violence. There were also instances where police and patrol officers joined together to pursue the alleged murderers or sometimes alleged murdered - in one notable case two people trekked across Arnhem Land looking for someone who was said to have been murdered and found him alive and well at the end of a truly epic journey.

Care must be taken here when using the term "patrol" or "patrol officer". In addition to the patrol officers of the Native Affairs Branch, police officers also went "on patrol" and carried out lengthy camel patrols in Central Australia, or horse patrols into uncontrolled areas like the Fitzmaurice River in the north in Arnhem Land. At such times these police officers may be referred to as "patrol officers". There was also a patrol service established to control contact between Japanese pearlers along the Arnhem Land coast and Aboriginal people. This was a sort of maritime patrol service, and the officers were generally appointed Protectors of Aboriginals. However, this is not the patrol service which I am dealing with.

Strehlow was appointed in April 1936, following the Board of Inquiry in 1935, and eventually took up duty later that year in October. He had camels, but no motor car for some years, and he carried out some long trips with camels into the south-west, which was the main focus of interest. He made recommendations about what might be done to restore a situation where just about everybody had left the reserve and headed for the railway line, for Alice Springs and the cattle stations. This was considered highly unsatisfactory. It was thought that the Aboriginal people were best back in their own country, looking after themselves rather than becoming hangers-on and loafers around centres of white settlement.

Strehlow initially came in to Alice Springs and then fairly rapidly moved himself out to Jay Creek, where he actually built his own house, or had a house built for him at his own expense (when he left the government bought it back from him). At Jay Creek there was a small reserve, and in fact this was part of the process of trying to keep Aboriginal people out of the towns and away from the whites' vices. Branch instructions to Strehlow emphasised the importance of the south-western region, and encouraged his living out there and advising on all issues relating to this area, but he was the only patrol officer in the Territory, and he was certainly responsible for working the whole of Central Australia, the north-east and the north-west up to the Granites and the Tanami.
In due course he achieved the title of Deputy Director of Native Affairs, but at this point he was employed by the branch of the Administration which was responsible for Medical Services, Health and Aboriginals. It was a tiny Branch - apart from the medical staff and the Chief Protector, Dr. Cook, it was just a handful of officers who were concerned with Aborigines, the clerical staff and this one solitary field officer. Eventually, he acquired a truck in 1938, and served in the Centre for six years from 1936 to 1942, but he then went off to serve in the armed services, and never resumed duties post-war.

He was asked if he wanted to return, but at that stage he was lecturing at Dunroon, at the College of Civil Affairs, which eventually became the Australian School of Pacific Administration (ASOPA), and links back to the interesting little group of people under Alf Conlon who were translated from Army Intelligence and such like into preparing for the re-occupation of the south-west Pacific, as the Japanese were pushed back. They developed plans for resuming civil administration in New Guinea, Borneo, and in other areas.

At the time Strehlow was offered his old job of patrol officer he was lecturing at Dunroon, and was just about to leave on a trip to New Guinea. He decided that he would stay on in the Army. I do not know whether the job was offered to him again at a later stage. It is interesting to note that while some of the senior officials had a high opinion of him, the Administrator of the day (C.L.A. Abbott) was fairly scathing about patrol officer Strehlow.

However, to return to the late 1930s. The New Guinea connection was still running very strong. In response to the comments made by Donald Thomson in his reports about Arnhem Land, and in view of the continued pressure and dissatisfaction with the Commonwealth's action in the North, the new Minister for the Interior, Jack McEwen, started casting round for advice on how to improve matters, and found Professor Elkin.

On one hand Thomson continually recommended the appointment of a patrol officer to work in Arnhem Land, and he himself very clearly had aspirations to be appointed to control matters in the Territory. However, what actually happened was that E. W. P. Chinnery was appointed Director of a new specialist Native Affairs Branch. Chinnery, in addition to being Government Anthropologist in New Guinea, was also a very senior officer in the New Guinea Administration, in charge of the District Services. Chinnery had started his career as a field officer in Papua, had then acquired university qualifications, and came back to New Guinea first as Government Anthropologist. Later he also assumed responsibility for the Department of District Services and Native Affairs. Very clearly Chinnery would bring to the Northern Territory his ideas about colonial administration. When McEwen announced his 'new deal' early in 1939, the scheme included district officers, - it envisaged a district officer in the Fitzmaurice area, in southern Arnhem Land, and there was already a suitable person for a district officer in Central Australia, with responsibility for the south-western area. As well as these district officers, there were also to be patrol officers, but it is interesting that the emphasis seemed to be on getting the senior people, the district officers, in place first, and later patrol officers, as things developed.

Chinnery was also appointed as an adviser to the Commonwealth Government on Aboriginal Affairs in general. At this time there was considerable pressure for the
Commonwealth to be given full responsibility for Aboriginal Affairs administration right throughout the country. Focusing on that south-western area from Alice Springs where the two states of Western Australia and South Australia and the Northern Territory join, there were proposals right through the late 1920s and early 1930s for a single administration in that area, and obviously the Commonwealth would be the appropriate administration. However there was also serious thought of the Commonwealth taking over the whole deal, and Chinnery had a role in advising the Commonwealth on that sort of question.

The establishment of the Native Affairs Branch in 1939 and the advent of war before Chinnery had really laid out his schemes in any detail seems the most appropriate place for me to stop. We have reached a point where the Commonwealth is not simply contending with a depression and a post-depression phase in which it was trying to spend as little money as possible. There is now a sudden switch in priorities - Aboriginal Affairs have a much higher priority in the Territory then ever before, they have a separate branch of their own, a new and relatively highly paid Director, and a promise at least of some staff. Then suddenly all the priorities changed again, and all that matters in the North is the military, and it is a matter of doing the best one can to adjust to the situation of war-time and priorities of defence.

In fact, a lot more happened than one might have thought, things did not come to a grinding halt. In the first couple of years, before the Japanese war begins, many defence projects commenced, roads were built, and from 1938 on there was a special military force established up here.

Partly in response to these developments there were developments in Aboriginal Affairs. The new compound in Darwin was taken over by the military so a new place was established across the harbour at Dellsaville. There was interest in establishing a place on Melville Island which led to the Snake Bay development. There was a new ration depot established in 1940 in Central Australia at Haasts Bluff. Certain changes were effected in the reserves, substantially in response to recommendations made by the patrol officer in the Centre. There were moves later in the war towards establishing an important reserve and ration depot south of the Kimberleys, south-west of Darwin, at Hooker Creek.

Another patrol officer also appears in the shape of Gordon Sweeney, a former missionary, and right through the war years he makes what reads now as heroic trips. Sweeney had no vehicle, he cadges rides on other peoples trucks, finds himself stranded and tries to arrange a lift by air or on somebody else's truck. Working from base in Alice Springs, he gets up to the Granites, into Western Australia, right across the Kimberleys, and returns to Alice Springs on army convoys which are going steadily up and down the road, but is occasionally stranded for days and weeks waiting for the next form of transport to turn up. For the first time the patrol officers are beginning to impose some form of control over these remote, isolated communities previously run as strange little kingdoms on their own. They bring word of new regulations about the employment of Aborigines in the pastoral industry, for example, advise on what miners in remote places should or should not do, and generally begin to make the presence of the Native Affairs Branch felt.

I think I have run out of time and will not go on to the further developments post-war when, after 1946, rather more patrol officers are appointed and obtain specialised training at Sydney University.