

THE ABORIGINAL SCHOOL AT PURFLEET, 1903–1965: A CASE STUDY OF THE SEGREGATION OF ABORIGINAL CHILDREN IN NEW SOUTH WALES, AUSTRALIA¹

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Introduction

By 1901 in New South Wales, the blueprint for the relationship between Aborigines and Europeans had been established: Aborigines were 'in a far better condition when living in small communities comparatively isolated and removed from intimate contact with Europeans'.² The policies of Protectionism and Segregation were accepted in state government unopposed. Aborigines from 'black camps' of the Manning were relocated onto a government reserve at Purfleet. For thirty years the Protection Board assigned the management to the United Aboriginal Mission.

The richly resourced Manning River Valley region is found on the mid-northern coast of New South Wales, Australia and north of Newcastle and the Hunter Valley. Taree, its largest town, was incorporated in 1885 and has remained its dominant centre ever since.³ The Biripi Aboriginal people were the original inhabitants of much of the region and remain a strong community there.⁴ The Aboriginal people of the southern part of the region are Worimi.

The situation in 1965

Taree, with a population of at least 10,050⁵ by 1965, had spread along the northern bank of the river and was the 'centre of one of the richest dairy districts'. On the other side, two miles directly south stood the Purfleet Aboriginal Station with a population of 225 Aborigines housed in 'comfortable modern cottages' nestling in 'a beautiful bush setting', or so claimed the journalist for *Dawn*, published by the New South Wales Aboriginal Welfare Board – its public propaganda arm.⁶ The community of the Taree district was proud of 'its Aboriginal content'. Local sporting bodies welcomed teams of Aboriginal players into their competition and Aboriginal sportspersons were chosen in representative teams.⁷ All this was true as the Aboriginal people had a long tradition of prowess in sports where assimilation seemed an easier process than in other aspects of social life.

1 The author gratefully acknowledges the award of an Australian Historical Association/Cultural Institutions Fellowship for 2004-5 in researching and writing this paper. He is also grateful to the NSW Department of Aboriginal Affairs for permission to examine restricted documents in State Records.

2 *1883-1884 New South Wales Aborigines' Protection Board Report*, Sydney, Government printer, 1884, p. 8.

3 See J. Ramsland, *The Struggle Against Isolation: a history of the Manning Valley*, Sydney, Library of Australian Press, 1987, pp. 65-84.

4 Ramsland, pp.180-194; also J. Ramsland, *Custodians of the Soil: a history of Aboriginal-European relationships in the Manning Valley of New South Wales*, Taree, Greater Taree City Council, 2001.

5 J.P.M. Long, *Aboriginal Settlements: a survey of institutional communities in Eastern Australia*, Australian National University Press, Canberra, 1970, p. 49.

6 'Taree ... A Happy Station! Aborigines Welcomed!' *Dawn*, March, 1953; there were regular circulars to reserve managers from the head of the New South Wales Welfare Board, the Superintendent of Aboriginal Welfare, soliciting material for the *Dawn* magazine that emphasized individual local success stories of the achievements of Aborigines and the success of the government's assimilation policy. They are contained in Aboriginal Welfare Circular Books, NSW State Records, Kingswood Records Centre, 1952-1956, 4/8552.

7 'Taree ... A Happy Station! '.

The Indigenous population of Purfleet Aboriginal Station consisted of Biripi people, who came mainly from their tribal territory on the northern side of the Manning River, and Worimi people, whose traditional territory was from the southern side of the same river to Port Stephens in the south. Other Indigenous people were removed from Karuah in the 1930s to Purfleet, helping to maintain the population there.

Between the 1950s and the mid 1960s, there were other signs of assimilation in terms of integrating the social life of Indigenous and white communities. Taree churches were showing interest in local Aborigines. Ministers of religion had begun to visit Purfleet Station and its Aboriginal school. The Taree Boy Scouts had taken Aboriginal boys into the Cub Pack. A Progress Association, a sign of self-determination, had been formed by Purfleet residents. It administered a School Fund that provided educational assistance, and there was a Scout Fund to provide for the requirements of the Station's own Boy Scout Troop, and later, for the formation of a Girl Guides Association. The Station had a 'thriving' Rugby (League) Football Club backed with 'substantial funds' to meet the needs of the forthcoming season.⁸ Rugby League had long been an important part of the Station's culture. Nevertheless, elements of racism were still serious problems in the Manning Valley.⁹

In his sociological study in 1964-65, J.P.M. Long noted that of all the New South Wales Aboriginal Stations Purfleet looked the least like an Aboriginal reserve:

Instead of being tucked away out of sight somewhere beyond the end of a sealed road, it was built on either side of the Pacific Highway, near a group of service stations and motels.... The newly painted cottages, neatly fenced and bristling with television aerials, might have been taken for an ordinary part of town.¹⁰

It was still a place apart, but a new era of schooling for the Station's children was culminated when nineteen pupils of the Aboriginal School were enrolled on the other side of the river divide at Taree Public School and a further six at Taree High School. They were bussed from the Station on a daily basis. The Aboriginal School was turned into a kindergarten attended by 'twenty tiny tots'.¹¹ Such changes ended the overlong existence of the segregationist Purfleet Aboriginal School.

The assimilation policy for schooling had been a long while arriving in Taree. Back in 1952, A.W. Lipscomb, Superintendent of Aboriginal Welfare, had confidently written:

Taree [Purfleet] is a very nice aboriginal station, with pleasant surroundings, and we look forward in the future to the people of this settlement taking their place in the general community life with satisfaction to everybody. [...] the time may be not far distant when children of this aboriginal station will be conveyed to Taree each day and attend the local public school and high school.¹²

His vision was one of 'establishing a closer and happier relationship with the white community'. In April 1952, the Welfare Board had visited Purfleet and recommended to the Department of Education 'that the Purfleet Aboriginal School be closed and be transferred to the Primary and Secondary Schools

8 'Taree ... A Happy Station!'

9 See Ramsland, *Custodians of the Soil*, pp. 156-161.

10 Long, p. 49.

11 Long.

12 A.W. Lipscomb, 'Visit to country centres. Taree and Wilcannia', *Dawn*, April 1952.

of Taree'.¹³ This was in line with the Board's new policy to re-settle 'suitable' Aboriginal families in New South Wales from outlying government reserves like Purfleet into townships. In November 1952, the Board recorded that the Department of Education had notified them that Aboriginal children could be transferred to Taree Public School 'as soon as additional rooms' were erected.¹⁴ The infants section transferred to the Taree Public (Infants) School on 30 July 1953.¹⁵ Some of the primary section continued at Purfleet until the school's closure in 1965 – evidence of a policy of gradual assimilation. During the mid 1940s to 1965, however, parents at Purfleet could apply to the Board to enrol their children at either Taree school.¹⁶ Many applications were rejected. They were more likely to be successful if they moved from Purfleet to the township, or held an Exemption Certificate.¹⁷

The development of segregated Aboriginal schooling from 1900

In 1900, Taree, the chief township of the Manning, boasted a Superior Public School with an attendance of 195 students. The place had banks, hotels, shops and stores and possessed 'one of the best Hospitals to be found in any country town'. The place appeared prosperous. Large quantities of maize were shipped to Sydney. Coastal steamships were loaded at the wharf by casual Aboriginal labour. Millet for broom-making was cultivated and a broom factory operated close to the Aboriginal fringe-dwelling camp at Purfleet using mainly Aboriginal labour. Aborigines worked at 'pulling' maize during harvest. The local dairy industry was dominant. There were 524 registered dairy farms where Aborigines worked. In homesteads and town homes Aboriginal women and girls worked long hours as domestic servants. There was labour available to Aborigines in the creameries and the two butter factories. The timber industry was another major venue for Aboriginal workers. The population of the township and police district was 9,000 including nine aliens and seventy-eight Aborigines, who were situated in the black camp on the southern side of the river which formed a cultural and spatial boundary where they had been assembled, corralled and counted by the local police.¹⁸ The local enterprises all employed Aboriginal labour from over the river. There was outdoor day labour in trench digging on the draining of 'The Big Swamp', a government project that improved several farming properties.¹⁹ The situation in the Taree district was labour intensive for Aborigines, with little or no unemployment for them. They could not live in the town but laboured there during the daylight. Their earnings were casual and poor. They did not share in the region's prosperity. They were on the very margins of society.

In 1900 as well, the Protection Board in Sydney received from the Taree Police Station a list of twenty-six Aboriginal children whose parents were prepared to send them to school if clothing was provided.

13 *Aborigines' Welfare Board Minute Book*, 15 December 1953 to 16 February 1960, 15 April 1952 (item 3 in the minutes), 4/8546, State Records, Kingswood (restricted).

14 *Aborigines' Welfare Board Minute Book*, Minutes of November 1952.

15 *Aborigines' Welfare Board Minute Book*, Minutes of 18 August 1953.

16 For example, the case of G- M-, on 19 Jan. 1945, whose parents' respectful application for him to attend Taree School was turned down 'in view of the fact that the parents live on the Station and are not in possession of an Exemption Certificate'. This statement had been originally part of the local Inspector of Schools' report on the matter. The Chief Secretary's Department under which the Aboriginal Welfare Board operated concurred with the recommendation. Thus the request by the parents of G- M- was declined. "Purfleet Aboriginal School, 45/206/20196, Purfleet Aboriginal School File, 1950-1965, 14/702, State Records, Kingswood (restricted).

17 The Exemption Certificate could be revoked by the Board. Exemption Certificates were granted from time to time to respectable adult Aborigines at Purfleet Station, for example, *Aborigines' Welfare Board Minute Book*, Minutes of 18 August 1953, and 15 December 1953.

18 *Handbook and Guide for Northern Rivers of New South Wales Towns there served by the North Coast Steamship Navigation Company Limited*, 1900, p. 10.

19 Bank of New South Wales Ledgers for 1900, Inspector's half-yearly reports. Bank of New South Wales Archives, Sydney.

The Board approved of the expenditure.²⁰ At the same time, William Plummer, a local magistrate, compiled a census return for the police district of Taree: Males 5,198, Females 4,669, Total 9,867. Aboriginals, males 61, females 63, Total 124.²¹

Racist attitudes towards Aboriginal people predominated in the district. One correspondent to *The Manning River Times* wrote vehemently:

... the white selector's axe has destroyed the black man's paradise. But it is no doubt better so. The poor black man must go; there is no place for him with his microscopic intelligence in these bustling times. A kindly-intentioned State still attempts to educate the native, but the effort is not encouraging – [...].²²

This ugly racist pronouncement vibrated through the white community in the local media.

An optimistic photograph of the opening of the combined Purfleet Mission Hall and School on 24 June 1903 was taken by the United Aborigines Mission. The sign above the entrance of the simple slab timber building reads 'Provisional School Mission Hall 1903'. In front is a well-dressed group of Aboriginal people with their children. This photograph represents the first extant collective image of Aborigines on the mission who were under its imperialistic Christianising influence, segregated from the white community by its boundaries and by the Manning River itself.²³ The educational intention of the mission was re-education in Christian beliefs and the destruction of traditional Aboriginal beliefs and culture. The school's initial enrolment was twenty-nine children who had been excluded from the State education system and segregated in a Provisional School on the reserve.

The location of the Station at Purfleet was decided on the first Thursday in May 1900 at the meeting of the Aborigines Protection Board in Sydney. This was the establishment of a government reserve (No. 89) of eighteen acres.²⁴ To establish an official black camp at Purfleet was the ultimate symbol of the defeat of the Biripi and Worimi at the hands of the invading whites. A local landholder had made land available for the camp. Its distance from the township was considered perfect, acceptable to townspeople who wanted Aborigines out of the township and to those who did not want to be deprived of their labours.²⁵ The establishment of the Aboriginal Mission has to be seen in the context of the ambiguities of protectionist government designs that sought to remove Aborigines from townships and yet make use of their labour while quarantining them and the missionary zeal of a non-denominational protestant organisation who wished to re-educate Aborigines in terms of Christian piety and remove their so-called pagan beliefs. These missionaries believed that European settlement had brought little to the Aborigines 'beyond introducing the vices and communicating the diseases of civilisation'. Little had been done about the conditions Aborigines had been compelled to live in.²⁶ Nevertheless, the state and the church had in essence formed a coalition to control every aspect of the lives of Aborigines.

20 'Aborigines Board', *The Wingham Chronicle*, 6 April 1900; also 'Aborigines at Taree', *The Manning River Times*, 9 May 1900.

21 'Census Returns', *The Manning River Times*, 9 May 1900.

22 'Glimpses of the Manning', *The Manning River Times*, 31 July 1900.

23 The photograph was first published in the *New South Wales Aborigines Mission Messenger*, a newsletter of the religious organisation in 1904; a print of the photograph is in the author's archival collection. The photograph has been more recently produced in Ramsland, *Custodians of the Soil*, p. 78, and on the back of the dust cover.

24 Minutes of the NSW Aborigines Protection Board, May 1900, State Records of NSW Authority, Kingswood; 'Aborigines at Tinonee', *Manning River Times*, 19 May 1900.

25 Long, p. 49.

26 E.J. Telfer, *Amongst Australian Aborigines: forty years of missionary work. the story of The United Aborigines' Mission*, Sydney, self-published, 1939, Preface, p. 8.

The first missionary, Mary Delves, had been working with Aborigines at Purfleet since May 1901. Reports stated that she had toiled 'with tireless enthusiasm' to hasten the completion of the Mission Hall.²⁷ She introduced the children to Christian music, working from the strong musical talent amongst them. By the first anniversary of the Mission, she had established them as a fine choir confident to sing at the anniversary concert held in the Taree School of Arts in front of a large audience.²⁸ She was ultimately successful in fulfilling her desire to see a mission hall established on the Purfleet Station estate in line with the general policy of the United Aborigines' Mission as an organisation. They preferred the idea of a self-contained colony of devoted Christians.

Plans had been made to turn the hall into a segregated school for the schooling of Aboriginal children. By 1902, they were being excluded from Public Schools in many areas of New South Wales in a racist political campaign involving both politicians and parents.²⁹ The Member of Parliament for Taree had applied to have attention given to the educative needs in the Purfleet Aboriginal camp. The reply from the Minister of Public Instruction had allowed the establishment of a Provisional School for the children there.³⁰ J.J. Fletcher, in the late 1980s, explored this pattern and process convincingly in his study of the history of Aboriginal education in New South Wales.³¹

In the Purfleet School's early years, it was reasonably well organised by a succession of able teachers from the Department of Public Instruction supplemented by the dedicated missionaries teaching Sunday School and running evangelical programs for the children. Pupils received a thorough European elementary schooling with the indoctrination of a version of Christianity.

Matters became grimmer as the Aboriginal Protection Board progressively placed more restrictions in the early 1930s. The Station resembled an open prison. The Aborigines Protection Act was strengthened by several amendments in 1915, 1918 and 1936, and many children were removed from families and institutionalised elsewhere, becoming the 'stolen generation'.³² A resident government manager-teacher was appointed to Purfleet in 1932 and took over its entire management, thus pushing the missionary influence outside its boundaries. Although an untrained teacher, he took over the school removing its control from the Department of Education and placing it under that of the Protection Board and its successor, the Aboriginal Welfare Board.³³ From 1932, grim days lay ahead for the children at Purfleet. The provision of education declined rapidly. Instead, they became a junior labour force in the Station's gardens. The heavily controlled segregation did not begin to dissipate until the 1950s, and then only slowly. By the 1960s, there was much more optimism about white-black relationships on the Manning with the involvement of several community organisations from the township and Purfleet children began to attend the Taree state schools under the standard curriculum rather than the watered-

27 'Aboriginal Mission: Anniversary of the Taree Station', *Manning River Times*, 10 May 1902; 'Anniversary of the Taree Station', *New South Wales Aboriginal Advocate*, 31 May 1902.

28 'Aboriginal Mission'.

29 'Exclusion of Black Children from the Public Schools', *New South Wales Aborigines Advocate*, 31 May 1902, p. 3.

30 'Education of the Blacks', *Wingham Chronicle*, 29 February 1903; 'Aboriginal School at Purfleet', *Manning River Times*, 13 June 1903.

31 J.J. Fletcher, *Clean, Clad and Courteous: a history of Aboriginal education in New South Wales*, Sydney, Southward Press, 1989, pp. 1-375.

32 'Stolen generation' was a term coined in submissions to the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Inquiry into the separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families. See T.J. Wilson, *In the Best Interests of the Child? Stolen children: Aboriginal pain/white shame*, Canberra, Aboriginal History Monographs, Aboriginal History Inc., 1997.

33 Ramsland, *Custodians of the Soil*, pp. 85-93, 108-114.

down one used in segregated Aboriginal schools. But racism and bullying in the playground became problems.³⁴

Exploring the primary documents

Following the often broken trail of primary documents about the school from about 1904 reveals more flesh to this skeleton outline of change and fluctuations of fortune. There was extant evidence of excellent school performances of the Aboriginal children at the Station's school by 1905. Inspector Henderson was particularly pleased with his inspection in 1904:

The children had done remarkably well. He [the Inspector] had given the same lesson in writing as at the ordinary schools – the only difference being that this School had had twelve months less experience or, in other words, he had given the lesson one year earlier than was required, but the mark awarded was 80 per cent, which was most satisfactory, as well as gratifying and encouraging to the teacher, Mr. [William] Bruce.³⁵

The school, Henderson decided, had a standard higher than most small public schools in the district. Proof that Aboriginal children could be well educated in the European way was strong. During the 1900s, the school continued to establish a good reputation with Aboriginal parents. The respected state teacher, William Bruce, introduced agricultural education by establishing vegetable gardens beside the school building and was instructing the boys in the art of vegetable gardening and a range of other practical skills in various directions in addition to other aspects of the school syllabus.³⁶

The Aborigines Protection Board's stations were at first little more than camping grounds for the Aborigines who had been assembled there and where they were compelled to work for their rations. Gradually, they were developed into segregated settlements with so-called 'greatly improved huts for married couples'. Qualified teachers were appointed to teach in station schools. By the end of 1904, some 708 Aboriginal children were receiving schooling on 147 reserves throughout New South Wales. These government reserves had a total acreage of 25,959. Only seven Board reserves and some additional private ones had church mission establishments on them – and Purfleet was one of them.³⁷

By 1904, there were 106 Aborigines at Purfleet of whom sixty-five were half-castes. Of these, fifty-three were children, forty of them half-castes³⁸ – the result of sexual liaisons between Aborigines and Europeans in the Valley. Purfleet was a settlement full of children growing up in comparative poverty on the fringes of Australian society and was expanding rapidly.

It was reported that the children were making good progress in the schoolroom. The government teacher, William Bruce, and the New South Wales Aboriginal Mission's resident missionary, Maud Oldrey, were working harmoniously, forming a worthwhile team. They were the main links with the outside township culture. They took a great interest in the children and their parents and in return were 'loved' and respected by the Aboriginal community. By this time, the Station had been improved by enclosing fences, the cleared ground had been stumped and there was a flower garden in front of

34 Interview with John Clarke who was one of the initial group of Aboriginal children to attend Taree Public School, in P. Paulson (ed.), *Oral Histories and Portraits of members of the Aboriginal Community recorded in the Manning Valley and Great Lakes*, Taree, Manning Regional Art Gallery, 2005, p. 5.

35 'Annual Report of the Purfleet Mission Station', *New South Wales Aborigines Advocate*, 30 March 1905, p. 3.

36 'Purfleet-Taree Report', *New South Wales Aborigines Advocate*, 28 February 1905, p. 4.

37 W.H. Hall, *Official Year Book of New South Wales, 1904-5*, 1960, p. 640.

38 *New South Wales Aborigines Protection Board Report for the Year 1903*.

each family hut, built by the Aboriginal men themselves. They had established substantial communal vegetable gardens.³⁹

In late 1904, Bruce sought permission for Maud Oldrey to provide instruction in needlework in accordance with the Department's syllabus. She was already informally instructing the girls in sewing after school 'in connection with her other mission work'.⁴⁰ After considerable correspondence, permission was granted.⁴¹ Inspector Henderson, in recommending, commented:

This lady is a competent needlewoman and about 25 years of age. Excellent work is being done at the settlement and the children are developing into credible citizens. The school is 9th class and it would be a blessing to the female pupils if sewing were regularly and systematically taught as in our ordinary schools. The subject can possibly be of more benefit to these girls.⁴²

At a town celebration of the mission in the Taree School of Arts, Oldrey and the parents had the Aboriginal children 'neatly dressed' in white with blue sashes as they rendered company songs: 'The Wide, Wide World' and others. Eight adults sang 'I will shout for Jesus' and 'The future lies before me'.⁴³ There was irony in what the enthusiastic Aborigines sang under the baton of Oldrey who had striven, like her predecessor, to inculcate them with fundamental Christian doctrine through music. The children, nevertheless, enjoyed music and it became a strong part of their subculture.

Optimism was in the air on the settlement. On 24 May 1904, the anniversary of Miss Oldrey's settlement on the mission was celebrated. Enormous preparations had been made and the Taree townspeople sent over large baskets of food for the occasion. Shopkeepers donated lollies and other gifts for the children as well as prizes for the adult athletic contests. William Bruce provided prizes for the children's sports. Racing, cricket and boomerang throwing contests were highlights. The supply of provisions was so liberal that both a good dinner and tea were undertaken for the hundred or so of the settlement people and their guests who sat down together. A religious meeting was held and the excellent singing of the children's choir was appreciated by the visitors.⁴⁴ The picnic was the first of its kind and set the pattern of cultural interchange for a number of years. The pleasant companionship of white and black was palpable. It was a gold patch in the often troubled lives of the settlement families.

In 1908, Purfleet Aboriginal School had a Manual Training shed for the boys added and a professional carpenter's bench and tools were provided, transported there by the *S.S. Electra*.⁴⁵ Doing woodwork was viewed as a 'great benefit to the youths and help[s] to occupy their spare time'.⁴⁶ The school continued to progress in the golden years of the 1900s and good results were achieved. The missionaries and the school teachers attempted to bridge the gap between the town and the settlement, often with some success. But grimmer times lay ahead.

39 'Purfleet-Taree Report', NSWAA, 30 April 1905.

40 W.H. Bruce teacher to J. McCredie Acting Chief Inspector, Department of Public Instruction, 2 November 1904, Purfleet School file, 1879-1939, S/1739.3, State Records, Kingswood.

41 See Purfleet School File, 1879-1939.

42 R. Henderson, Inspector to Chief Inspector, 23 February 1905, Purfleet School, 1879-1939.

43 'Purfleet-Taree Report', *New South Wales Aborigines Advocate*, 30 April 1905.

44 'Purfleet-Taree', NSWAA, 30 June 1905.

45 'Purfleet (Aboriginal) Manual Training', Inspector William Kennedy to the Chief Inspector, Department of Public Instruction, 23 July 1908, Purfleet School File 1879-1979.

46 Inspector W. Kennedy to the Under Secretary of Public Instruction, 27 March 1907, Purfleet School File 1879-1979.

During 1915, the Aboriginal people had substantially abandoned the Mission. By September, only ten elderly Aborigines remained with a few children. The men had found work elsewhere in the Valley because of the labour shortages caused by enlistment in the Great War. Nevertheless, they used Purfleet as a home base whenever they could. Families moved in and out of the Mission and its population fluctuated. The missionaries, Mr and Mrs H.R. Crewdson, were left in charge of the school with very few on the roll.⁴⁷ In December, Crewdson resigned as schoolmaster and no successor could be found. The schoolhouse was locked up.

With Purfleet Aboriginal School closed temporarily, Aboriginal children enrolled in Glenthorne Public School about two miles north down the road. This was the signal for a racist reaction by the white community. Parents at the school petitioned the New South Wales Minister of Education:

If these children are not immediately withdrawn and power given to the teacher to refuse admission to any Aborigines, we shall withdraw our children from this school [Glenthorne Public School] at an early date, it is well-known that these children come from a camp that is not healthy.⁴⁸

Several members of the families at the Mission were indeed suffering from tuberculosis and 'the parents of the white children object to the young ones [from the Purfleet Mission] attending the school'.⁴⁹

In May 1916, Mr Sheppard, the Glenthorne teacher, reported that all of his white pupils had been withdrawn by their parents and subsequently enrolled in Taree Superior Public School on the other side of the river.⁵⁰ They travelled across in rowing boats. Sheppard's school was now virtually 'an aboriginal school'. After his special visit to Glenthorne, the local inspector confirmed that all the white children had been withdrawn and the effective enrolment was thirteen Aboriginal children from Purfleet Mission Station. But their attendance was poor. He pointed out that attendance was so bad that there was no justification to operate the school at all: 'The dark children attended much better when the school at the Mission Station was open so that the change has not benefited them in any way'. He went on to recommend the closure of Glenthorne Public School.⁵¹

As the mission school was closed for the majority of 1915, the Inspector suggested that a subsidised teacher be employed by the Aborigines Protection Board at Purfleet Mission Station. *The Daily Telegraph* claimed:

The Education Department has just been called upon to solve a peculiar difficulty arising out of the refusal of the white children to attend the same school as aboriginal children The aboriginal children had disappeared, and the school was left without any scholars at all.⁵²

The mission hall was re-opened in July 1916 as a school, but only seventeen Aboriginal pupils attended regularly as there was much sickness amongst families. Miss Fraser, a new missionary from the United Aboriginal Mission, became the teacher-in-charge.⁵³ She was considered an excellent dominie

47 'Purfleet', *Australian Aborigines Advocate*, 30 September 1915.

48 Cited in G. Dennes, 'History of Glenthorne Public School' manuscript, Gordon Dennes Papers, The Manning Valley Historical Society Museum, Wingham, unpaginated.

49 Dennes.

50 Cited in Dennes; also found in Glenthorne Public School File, Department of Education, State Records, Kingswood.

51 Glenthorne Public School File.

52 *The Daily Telegraph*, June 1915, newspaper cutting in Gordon Dennes Papers.

particularly responsive to the children's needs. In 1919, there were several tragic deaths of children at Purfleet during the influenza pandemic.⁵⁴ The numbers at the Purfleet Mission built up steadily during the 1920s. Miss Fraser was joined by two other missionaries from her religious society.⁵⁵ In November 1926, a new mission hall was opened to some fanfare, comprising four rooms lined and ceiled – 'a very nice little building'.⁵⁶ The original building from then on operated exclusively as the schoolroom.

By the mid 1920s, it was the regular, well-known practice of the Aboriginal Welfare Board to remove Aboriginal children from their parents on reserves like Purfleet at a certain age – usually about twelve – and place them out as farm-labouring apprentices or domestic servants on farms and homes in the countryside. They became a form of cheap labour. Some children of an earlier age were removed to Cootamundra Training Home, in the case of girls, or to Kinchela Training Home near Kempsey, in the case of boys. Both homes were government institutions directly under the Aborigines Protection Board. The 'subject of their location' was 'withheld' from their parents.⁵⁷ This caused much grief amongst families at Purfleet and continuously diminished the enrolment at the reserve's school. *The Wingham Chronicle* in their defence argued that 'to separate the youth of the two sexes in this way, is one of the surest means of hastening' the 'extinction'⁵⁸ of the Aboriginal people. Such a prediction did not occur, due to Aboriginal passive resistance of a networking kind in adjacent missions along the north and south coast of New South Wales and elsewhere.

The story of Purfleet Aboriginal School and its community in the 1930s and early 1940s is grim. By 1934, the United Aborigines Mission Hall was removed from the Purfleet Reserve precinct by lorry and skid-poles and placed beyond the boundaries,⁵⁹ thus symbolising a shift of power of the various agencies influencing the lives of the local Aborigines. The Protection Board was taking over control of the Station. The role of missionaries was being diminished. Even more restrictions of movement were being placed on the Aboriginal people, especially during the Great Depression.

In 1932, Edward Williams, an English ex-military man, had been appointed as Teacher-Manager of the Taree Aboriginal Station at Purfleet by the Protection Board. His duties comprised managing the whole reserve and teaching the Aboriginal children in the school. His wife was appointed matron of the reserve and was given approval by the Department of Education to teach sewing to the Aboriginal girls and boys.⁶⁰ At the time of William's appointment, there were nine girls and twenty-one boys enrolled at the Purfleet School. Seven of the girls and twenty of the boys were over seven years of age and in the primary section. More of the girls had clearly been placed out as domestic servants at an early age. Williams was an 'unclassified', untrained teacher from the Department of Education's perspective.⁶¹

He found the school building dilapidated, 'quite unsuitable', and reverted to running the school in the larger Mission Hall built by the United Aboriginal Mission. In making this decision, he pointed

53 *The Australian Aborigines Advocate (AAA)*, 31 July 1916, p.8; 31 August 1916, p.8; 31 October 1916, p. 8; 30 April 1917, p. 8.

54 AAA, 30 August 1919 (unpaginated).

55 AAA, 31 July 1920.

56 AAA, 31 December 1926.

57 'The Aborigines', *The Wingham Chronicle*, 4 December 1925.

58 'The Aborigines'.

59 Photograph of Mission Hall on lorry and skid poles, c.1934, Aboriginal Welfare Board Photographs.

60 In Aboriginal Schools in New South Wales at the time sewing was a subject prescribed for both boys and girls.

61 E.P. Williams Teacher-Manager to H.G. Campbell, Inspector of Schools, Taree 'Sewing allowance to the Teacher's Wife', 26 August 1932, Purfleet File, 1876-1939, State Records, Kingswood & City, 5/17392.3.

out that the size of the Hall was 30 feet by 18 feet and could provide accommodation for up to fifty-four pupils and it provided 'sanitary accommodation' for both sexes.⁶² In 1933, the teacher's vested residence from Glenthorne was placed on the reserve as the schoolhouse. The old Mission Hall was removed. The reason Williams needed a larger schoolhouse was to accommodate the increase in the expected numbers of Aboriginal families to be forced to live at Purfleet due to changes in the policies of the Board. His appointment was a significant part of such changes.

Williams' appointment coincided with the new type of station that the Board was creating. The Board's extra powers, under the 1932 amendment to the 1909 *Aborigines' Protection Act*, were to 'concentrate in reserves, people of Aboriginal blood, with definite control over them ... and they would not be at liberty to leave without permission'.⁶³ In the same year, the Purfleet Reserve was extended to fifty-one acres⁶⁴ to accommodate more Aboriginal families. The population of the reserve grew almost daily.

The work load of Williams was a difficult one as he had to combine his duties as a teacher with those of manager. Soon the school contained thirty-five children of all ages. In early 1936, it was anticipated that the school would soon reach fifty or more. By February 1936, the population of the reserve was 250 and increasing rapidly. It included 68 men registered for emergency relief work under the direction of Williams. He and his wife were responsible for keeping the accounts, purchasing and distributing rations and clothing for the whole station and dispensing medicine. Williams was also in charge of the clearing and fencing of new areas of the reserve, the erection of new cottages and the sinking of wells. He supervised Aboriginal settlements at Forster and Dingo Creek, near Wingham. And there were other regular, more minor tasks.⁶⁵

All of this caused him to neglect his school duties. He was absent from the classroom for long periods on a regular basis. Using his military experience, he created a spick and span military-style outpost. The School became a disaster area of educational values – the older boys spending the majority of the time engaged in heavy outdoor fencing work.

Unfortunately for pupils in Aboriginal schools on reserves like Purfleet, David Drummond, the long serving New South Wales Minister of Education in the 1930s, believed that Aborigines belonged to a 'child-race' incapable of handling their own affairs and safe-guarding their own interests. He, therefore, strongly advocated and supported the notion of segregated Aboriginal Schools at a distance from the white community. He believed that such children could be educated only to the 8th primary grade at the very best. Therefore, Aboriginal Schools never presented the full primary programme. His policy dominated educational thinking throughout the 1930s and into the 1940s.⁶⁶

The period between 1936 and 1945 has a paucity of extant primary source documents about Purfleet School, but the changes that were implemented from 1940, with the abolition of the Aborigines' Protection Board and the establishment of the Aborigines Welfare Board, are significant. It was finally realised that the system of education on reserves for Aboriginal children 'left much to be desired', especially the syllabus, which for children in Aboriginal Schools was a watered down version providing the equivalent of the standard of attainments of 'a normal child in ordinary schools of 8 years of age'.

62 E.P. Williams Teacher-Manager to the Chief Inspector of Schools, Department of Education, 24.10.1932, Purfleet File, 1876-1939.

63 Aborigines Protection Board, 1932 as cited in E. Simon, *Through My Eyes*, Sydney, Seal Books, 1978, p. 12.

64 Simon, p. 13.

65 Memorandum from F. Ravenscroft Inspector of Schools to the Chief Inspector, 20 February 1936, Purfleet File, 1879-1939.

66 Fletcher, p. 146.

It was recommended that the roles of teacher-manager be separated: managers, it was argued, were not competent to instruct and were untrained for the classroom.⁶⁷ The Second World War delayed the reformation of the education of Aboriginal children in New South Wales. At Purfleet, matters took a long time to evolve.

L.N. Briggs, the Teacher-Manager at Purfleet, took the initiative in late 1947. In a forthright letter to the Superintendent, Aboriginal Welfare Board, he pointed out that he was not able to give 'sufficient time and attention' to teaching despite carrying it out to the best of his ability. He 'was not achieving the best possible results' in the time that was available. The enrolment was thirty-three children ranging from seven to fifteen years; his managerial duties allowed no time for lesson preparation; the School was not equipped to give instruction to children he believed to be of 'sub-normal intelligence'; pupils of upper division required so much attention that the lower division was neglected; home environments did not provide 'a stimulating background for educational progress' and the teacher-manager's interests were divided. He believed that a full-time teacher was necessary, especially as the manager had to take disciplinary action against members of the children's families, and that the children would receive a much better education off the Station property in a school of their own run by the Department of Education as a separate authority. He was 'gravely concerned' about the youth, 'many of them being content to earn a few shillings by casual work in the town for a few hours each week' and spend the rest of the time in 'idleness'.⁶⁸ Briggs' letter struck the right note that ushered in the developments already described in the 1950s and the early 1960s.

Conclusion

Integrated schooling of the early 1960s had only been achieved slowly and hesitantly on the Manning River. The breakthrough started with the removal of the control of Aboriginal School from the Board's clutches, but the whole process was very slow and disjointed. The Department of Education recognised that relieving the manager of his teaching duties was desirable, and that, if the school was to continue because of the increase in the Purfleet Station's population, it should be under the control of a trained primary teacher. Mr E.C. Ruff, took over the School at the beginning of 1948.⁶⁹ The desultory movement towards integration began. It was not until 1965 that the school was closed, but new problems were to emerge.

In mid-1962, there were 201 half castes and three full blood Aborigines living at Purfleet Station, but the number of children attending Taree Public School was reasonably healthy, in comparative terms – sixty one (the largest enrolment in the state of children living on a reserve) and fifteen others were attending Taree High School.⁷⁰ The future had some promise, but negative teacher attitudes, and racism and bullying in the playground made many of the Aboriginal children more vulnerable. Life outside the mission was difficult for them. Country town unemployment had a permanency that was also restrictive to Aboriginal youth. Government policies had not worked well on the local scene.

67 *Aboriginal Protection Board and Recommendation of the Public Service Board of New South Wales*, 4 April 1940, Government Printer, NSW, 1940, p. 17.

68 L.N. Briggs, Teacher-Manager to The Superintendent, Aborigines Welfare Board, 23 October 1947, Purfleet Aboriginal School File.

69 Aboriginal Station, Purfleet Taree. Appointment of Departmental Teacher, 18.12.1947.

70 Taree Aboriginal Station, Purfleet, 30 July 1962, Aboriginal Stations & Reserves a statistical return, 4/8565.1.