The founding of a just relation of the white and dark races is not our problem alone. It is described as the most important business of this century. It is a world problem...Aggression against one race is aggression against all...there is no quarrel with the settlers: the objection is to the system – analogous to slavery – by which the natives are deprived of their livelihood with their hunting-grounds, thus compelled to work for the settlers and then prevented from selling their labour.

Mary Bennett,
*The Australian Aboriginal as a Human Being*, 1930

I think the country at large needs training in just ideas...

Mary Bennett to William Grayden, 23 April 1959
JUST RELATIONS

The Story of Mary Bennett’s Crusade for Aboriginal Rights

Alison Holland
For Rob
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The love and support of my family has underwritten this project – and me – from beginning to end. This has provided a much needed port in the storm for myself and my children, for which we are blessed. To Louis and Rose, treasures of my heart, when you read this perhaps it will help you understand my distractions, lapses and irritating commitment to the task from time to time. I hope it explains my particular interest in Aboriginal history and why I couldn’t just ‘forget about the book’ despite your amazing selves and your occasional pleas. Rest assured your hugs and love fuelled every page.

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<td>Australian Aboriginal Amelioration Association</td>
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<tr>
<td>AAL</td>
<td>Australian Aborigines’ League</td>
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<tr>
<td>AFA</td>
<td>Aborigines’ Friends Association</td>
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<td>AFWV</td>
<td>Australian Federation of Women Voters</td>
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<td>ALP</td>
<td>Australian Labor Party</td>
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<td>ALRC</td>
<td>Australian Law Reform Commission</td>
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<td>ASIO</td>
<td>Australian Security Intelligence Organisation</td>
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<tr>
<td>BCL</td>
<td>British Commonwealth League</td>
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<tr>
<td>CAR</td>
<td>Council for Aboriginal Rights</td>
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<td>CDNR</td>
<td>Committee for the Defence of Native Rights</td>
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<tr>
<td>FCAA</td>
<td>Federal Council for Aboriginal Advancement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ILO</td>
<td>International Labour Organization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IWD</td>
<td>International Women’s League</td>
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<tr>
<td>League for Aboriginal Women</td>
<td>League for the Protection and Advancement of Aboriginal and Half-Caste Women</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sub-Commission for Minorities</td>
<td>Sub-Commission for the Prevention of Discrimination and the Protection of Minorities (UN)</td>
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<tr>
<td>The 1937 Canberra conference</td>
<td>Initial Conference of Commonwealth and State Aboriginal Authorities, 21–23 April, 1937</td>
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<td>UAM</td>
<td>United Aborigines’ Mission</td>
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<tr>
<td>UN</td>
<td>United Nations</td>
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<tr>
<td>UNESCO</td>
<td>United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation</td>
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<tr>
<td>WCTU</td>
<td>Woman’s Christian Temperance Union</td>
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<td>WNPA</td>
<td>Woman’s Non-Party Association</td>
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NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY

The Dalleburra

Other names and dialect names: Yirandali, Dalebura, Dal-leyburra, Irendely, Pooroga, Yerrundulli, Yerrunthully

Location: Flinders River, Hughenden, Lammermoor, Landsborough Creek, Torrens Creek, Tower Hill Creek, Winton

Critical to Mary Bennett’s story is the group of Aboriginal people on whose country her father settled in the early 1860s in Queensland’s north. Bennett’s father named the tribe the Dalleburra and, as the above reference attests, it has been recorded thus ever since as a world language. It represents Robert Christison’s translation of what he heard when he first made contact, catching ‘at a word here and there’, as Bennett put it. She described Dalleburra country as on Tower Hill Creek at the head of the Thomson River and between Hughenden and Muttaburra. Bennett’s family also recorded the group as Yirandali. Dalleburra was one of the four tribes which comprised the Yirandali language group.

Whereas Yirandali features on David Horton’s Indigenous language map, Dalleburra does not. There is a group to the south of Yirandali identified as Dharawala. This group is associated with the Barcoo River and their country is around present-day Blackall, a couple of hundred kilometres to the south of Muttaburra. Not only are Dalleburra and Dharawala similar sounding, they appear to occupy similar country. The key river in the Lammermoor tablelands is the Thomson, which meets the Barcoo in the south. Notably, both rivers share the same tributaries – the Torrens, Landsborough and Towerhill creeks – all of which Bennett mentions as significant to the Dalleburra. Notably, none of the language groups which Bennett identifies as surrounding the Dalleburra – the Quippenburra in the north, the Muttaburra in the south, the Munggoobra in the east and the Goamulgo in the west – are represented on Horton’s map.

The Wongutha and Wongkai

Wongutha or Wongatha is the language of the large group of Aboriginal people of the northeastern goldfields in Western Australia. Their tribal boundary borders the regions of Coolgardie, southeast Wiluna and the western half of the Great Victoria Desert. Some of the people on
Mt Margaret Mission referred to themselves as ‘Wongi’ or ‘Wangai’. Bennett used ‘Wangkai’ or ‘Wongkai’ to refer to the goldfields people among whom she worked after World War II. This included the desert people from the Warburton Ranges.

Commonly Used Words and Phrases
Throughout this book there are words and phrases used which relate to outmoded and offensive racialising discourses of the past. The two most frequently used are full-blood and half-caste. These terms relate to the connection between blood and race which, by the twentieth century, had preoccupied western thought for hundreds of years. They were readily adopted in Australia from the 1830s and were subsequently enshrined in legislation controlling Aborigines; however, they had particular resonance in the racial imaginary of the first half of the twentieth century. The connection between blood and race was greatly facilitated by the creation of a biochemical race index following World War I. This was thought to provide a scientific means of racially classifying people by blood type. This was particularly useful in Australia where scientists and administrators looked to science to solve the ‘Aboriginal problem’. In the blood tests carried out amongst Aboriginal populations in the 1920s, scientists thought they’d found an empirical base for their view that the ‘pure’ race of full-blood Aboriginal people was dying out and being replaced by an allegedly inferior population of half-castes, or Aborigines of mixed descent.3

I also use the word native. It is notable that the etymology of this word, like full-blood and half-caste, is closely related to the era of European colonial and imperial expansion. It is used in this book as individuals used it at the time, as both a noun and an adjective. As an adjective it meant ‘innate, produced by birth’ from the fourteenth century and, from the fifteenth, ‘born in a particular place’. As a noun it was applied by European powers to the original inhabitants of non-European lands from the seventeenth century.4 In Australia it was still being used, in both senses, to refer to Aboriginal people until World War II. Afterwards it was still deployed in a bureaucratic setting. Legislation continued to define natives, and some administrators became native commissioners, following precedent elsewhere in the empire. It is testament to the power and hold of such concepts that even those, like Bennett, who fought against such essentialising terms still had recourse to use them.
Note on Terminology

Closely related to these words are the phrases ‘Aboriginal problem’ and ‘native question’. Critical to the book is the recovery of a discourse about this problem/question. The phrases were used interchangeably, particularly from the late nineteenth century, to describe a problem the British inherited in colonising lands occupied and owned by indigenous peoples. Closely related to the notion of the white man’s burden, the Aboriginal problem/native question generated much heated debate in England and Australia about ‘what to do with the blacks’, as Mary Bennett put it. In the nineteenth century it was described as ‘the greatest moral difficulty of colonisation’. In tracing Bennett’s and others’ efforts to find a solution to this problem, this book charts the changing responses to and dynamics of this question from the late 1920s to the 1960s.

As the foregoing suggests, this book is not the biography of a key twentieth-century humanitarian alone. It is also a study of ideas about race, racial difference, racial destinies, racial discrimination and concepts of racial justice. Recourse to the language used to discuss and think about these ideas in the past has therefore been unavoidable. My inclination was to place quotation marks around the words and phrases wherever they appear in the text because I feared that their constant iteration normalised them. I wanted to demonstrate how contingent they were. However, they occur so frequently in the text that, in the interests of stylistic consistency and fluency, I decided not to do so. I apologise for any offence they may cause and want to emphasise that in using them I don’t endorse the connotations of race they embody. As key imaginary significations of European colonial powers, we are still living with their institutional effects.
On 6 October 1961, Mary Bennett, leading advocate for Aboriginal human rights, died in Kalgoorlie hospital aged eighty. At that moment, a close friend of hers, Ada Bromham, was sitting at her kitchen table sorting through her papers, which she described as lining two rooms of the small home from the floor to three-quarters of the way up the walls. She had finished sorting through them when she received the news of Mary’s death. Less than an hour later, Bromham heard a knock on the front door. On opening it two suited men representing the Western Australian Crown Law department, carrying large suitcases, barged past her into the house and scooped up as much as they were able, including what she had set aside for herself on the table, leaving only the Hansards.

A battle ensued between the state, Bromham and the Council for Aboriginal Rights, a Victorian-based Aboriginal rights organisation which Bromham was involved with and Bennett had been in close contact and communication with over the previous decade. By the time of her death she had amassed at least 40 years’ evidence in defence of Aboriginal human rights. To her friends in the council Bromham exclaimed, ‘you could not imagine such a huge collection of material unless [you] had seen it’. In a carefully orchestrated exchange, the state eventually returned the papers to Bromham. Packing them in boxes, she sent them by rail to Melbourne where they were collected by Dr Barry Christophers, then president of the council, who stored them in the garage of his surgery. Just weeks later they were stolen. When Christophers informed the police, no action was taken.

Mary Montgomerie Bennett (1881–1961) – ‘Mimi’, as she was known to her family – was the eldest daughter of Robert Christison, a Scottish
immigrant to Australia who established a pastoral empire – Lammermoor – on Queensland’s northern frontier in the 1860s. As her mother disliked living there, Bennett spent most of her life in England. She nonetheless experienced concentrated periods of time on Lammermoor where, when in Australia, the family would return from their southern residences for the winter. After marrying a merchant sea captain, Charles Douglas Bennett, in 1914 she settled in Hertfordshire. When he died, in 1927, she threw herself into the Aboriginal cause, gaining a reputation as a champion of the Aborigines.

In 1930 Bennett returned to Australia to take up the cause on the ground, becoming the first full-time teacher to Aboriginal children in the Great Victoria Desert of Western Australia. It was there that she launched a sustained and scathing critique of the administration of Aborigines in Australia generally and Western Australia in particular. This culminated in a full-scale row with A. O. Neville, the leading Aboriginal affairs bureaucrat in that state. Following a short period of reprieve in London between 1941 and 1950, she returned to Australia to continue her crusade, eventually settling in Kalgoorlie. Two of her closest Aboriginal friends were with her when she died: her ex-pupils Sadie Corner and Gladys Vincent. They later recorded how the Wongutha came from everywhere to attend her funeral, even the camp folk.

Her legacy was being rewritten at the moment of her death as her death notice in the Kalgoorlie Miner simply stated:

Woman Who Worked For Natives Dies
Mrs M M Bennett Well-Known
For Assistance to Aborigines

...An urge to do something for other people saw her return to Australia where she settled down to devoting her life to the welfare of natives. One of her finest gestures was the donating of a hospital to the Mt Margaret Mission. Mrs Bennett was often seen around Kalgoorlie courthouse where she gave assistance to natives charged with offences.¹

Welfare worker and philanthropist she certainly was, but she was also one of Australia’s leading mid-twentieth century human-rights advocates.
This book started with my efforts to retrieve Bennett’s papers. I never found a single collection. Rather I found threads in archives around Australia and England, particularly in the papers of fellow humanitarians and advocates for Aboriginal rights. These threads and the tussle over her papers revealed an important part of her story. Bennett’s articulation of the need for humane intervention in the lives of Aboriginal people was not hers alone but one she shared with others across the middle years of the twentieth century. Hers had particular resonance for the Australian state, however.

*Just Relations* is my attempt to pull these threads together. Part biography, it should more rightly be understood as the history of an idea or set of ideas about what constituted justice for Aboriginal people and just relations between Aborigines and non-Aborigines in Australia, which was central to Mary Bennett’s life work.
INTRODUCTION

This book gives new meaning to the phrase ‘long overdue’. To many in the Australian historical profession Mary Bennett is well known. There is a history prize in her name, and several historians have written about aspects of her life and career. As one of the latter, I had never envisaged writing her biography. What drew me to her were her ideas and her advocacy, and what her story could tell us about mid-twentieth century humanitarian endeavour around what had long been framed the Aboriginal problem in Australia. This was partly conditioned by the moment of our meeting, which was my stumbling upon a communication between Ada Bromham and Jessie Street concerning the removal of her papers. Who was this woman and why and in what context did this happen? In the course of writing this book, I’ve come to see that her biography and her humanitarianism are meshed: it is impossible to understand her story – her crusade – without understanding her biography and vice versa.

I began this book in earnest while on a six-month period of study leave in 2012 which offered me precious time to bring together my thoughts about the relevance of Mary Bennett and her life’s work. I didn’t have to look far. Indeed, the fraught politics of Aboriginal affairs in the late twentieth, and early twenty-first centuries resonated with the same about eighty years earlier in which Mary Bennett was a key protagonist. The discourse was remarkably similar, including the interjections of humanitarians like her. The cacophony of claims and counter-claims about the rights and wrongs of the past, about land, citizenship, the position of Aboriginal women and children, the statistics around Indigenous health, mortality and education, the high rates of incarceration, Aboriginal economies, Aboriginal futures and discrimination were as relevant then as they continue to be today. In particular, the conflicted politics around the federal government’s Intervention in the
Introduction

Northern Territory in 2007, and the issues that gave rise to it, led me to rethink the significance of Mary Bennett’s life work.

She began active involvement in Aboriginal affairs in Australia with the publication of her book, *The Australian Aboriginal as a Human Being*, in 1930. Described at the time as a ‘whole-hearted indictment of the Federal Government’s treatment of the problem of the Aborigines’, it was her response to the 1928 Bleakley Report, a federal government investigation into the condition, status and treatment of Aborigines in the centre and the north.¹ In it she argued that there was still time, in the context of the late 1920s, for an ‘honourable settlement’ to be made with the Aborigines in that region. Intervention was urgently needed to stem the flow of depopulation in an area which had the largest Aboriginal population of any region in Australia, and to save them from extinction. Land, education, food and medical attention was urgent. Intervention was needed to put a stop to the slave-like conditions in which Aboriginal people laboured. Intervention was needed to stop legal injustice, the abuse of women and children, and the racial violence which characterised that frontier. Intervention was needed to solve a problem we had created, repay our debts, honour our obligations and make restitution.

This burden was not Australia’s alone, however. For Bennett the brutality of white settlement in Australia mirrored the processes of colonialism elsewhere. Dispossession was backed by race hate and discrimination wherever empires were made. Yet, the interwar period delivered some hope of redress. She was deeply impressed and influenced by the politics and rhetoric of the hour, particularly the ethics of care of imperial humanitarianism and its message of native peoples as a sacred trust of civilisation. The great hope for Australian Aborigines, according to this logic, was that Australians had an opportunity to make amends for the past. ‘To give justice to the remnant of our Aboriginal tribes is the greatest and most urgent of all our duties’, she said.² Describing the League of Nations as a mechanism for creating a ‘larger society where aggression against one race was aggression against all’, she defined the Aboriginal problem as a world problem, warning that the founding of a just relationship between black and white was the most important business of the twentieth century.³ As we left the twentieth century and the founding of a just relationship, particularly in the north, continued to elude us, her story seemed more pertinent than ever.
In large part, this book locates Mary Bennett’s life story in her humanitarianism. It privileges the second half of her life, from the mid-1920s to her death in 1961, which she spent tirelessly fighting for Aboriginal human rights as she defined them. She literally died fighting that cause. Her humanitarian crusade is meaningless, however, without an appreciation of her familial context and background. She was the privileged daughter of one of the most successful pastoralists of the nineteenth-century Australian frontier, described in the press of the day as a colonial millionaire. Her father, Robert Christison, owned huge swathes of land in north Queensland which carried an enormous amount of cattle and delivered her family great comfort and wealth, including an immense English estate to which the family retired in the early years of the twentieth century. Her ability to speak on Aboriginal issues at all was, quite literally, built on her father’s dispossession of them. As her hand-drawn map adorning the back cover of her biography of him suggests, this was not Christison’s country. It was the Dalleburra’s. Her life and her life’s work had purpose and meaning as a result of this fact.

Indeed, it is possible to interpret her tireless work on behalf of Aboriginal people in Australia as her own personal quest to alleviate the
burden of guilt – even shame – of her privilege. This was made more pressing by her slow realisation of the humanity of Aboriginal people as against the inhumanities of her own class and society. It seems that she had an awakening around the middle years of her life which jolted her out of the safety and security of her own upbringing. This is epitomised in a comment she made to her very close friend, Ada Bromham, a month before she died: ‘I grew up a shocking imperialist but not so shocking as to accept their blasphemies’.6

When she wrote of Aboriginal people as generous, intelligent, resourceful and compassionate, this was as a mirror to her own society. Their communal living, their cooperation, their strict morality and law, and their dedication to family contrasted sharply with the competition, war, selfishness and dislocation of her own world as she saw it and ‘the very nasty civilized cut-throat way of doing things’.7 Aboriginal people’s lack of material things was compensated by a deep spirituality. When she said, in The Australian Aboriginal as a Human Being, that there was still time to co-operate with Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory, she saw this as an opportunity for ‘us’ as much as them, for ‘civilisation will not be whole without them’.8 We had much to learn from them, they were our allies and ‘a spirit force which we lost at our own peril’.9

Her taking up the Aboriginal cause in earnest, moreover, was compensation for her own loss. Between 1915 and 1927 she lost her father, mother and husband. She also lost Wyma, the Aboriginal nursemaid who helped raise her as a young child when, at critical periods of her youth, she stayed at Lammermoor. Her father’s death, in 1915, had a profound effect on the family. It was not just the loss of the patriarch who held the family together and gave it shape and force, it was the loss of family fortunes as a result of the war. While her mother returned to Australia with her sister not long after, Mary stayed on in England having married Charles Douglas Bennett just a year before her father’s death. Charles was a mariner in the Royal Navy who had been an acquaintance of her father’s since the early 1900s. While he appeared to be the cause of some rift in the family, his support of Mary, in her decision to take up the Aboriginal cause, was in marked contrast to the rest of her family who tried to steer her away from it. This rift was never repaired, and the Aboriginal cause filled the gap for the rest of her life while maintaining a connection to her adored father,
who had himself desired to set the record straight on the humanity of Aboriginal people.

Yet, to reconstruct Bennett’s life-long commitment to Aboriginal rights solely as the product of her own psychological quest would be to miss an important opportunity to tell a story which is deeply rooted in the Australian historical landscape. Bennett’s inheritance and the burden which came with it was symptomatic of the inheritance British settlers gained when they dispossessed the Aborigines all over Australia. Hers is therefore an important story of Australian history, at once personal and private and public and political. On the one hand, it is a story she shares with a number of similarly placed daughters and wives of the nineteenth-century frontier, whose personal interactions with Aboriginal people at formative stages of their lives created deep memories shaped by their fathers’ and husbands’ pioneering. On the other hand, it is the story of one person’s attempts to bring that legacy to account, to have the Aboriginal problem raised as a national and imperial responsibility, to have Australia face its racist past. It is the story of the demand for Aboriginal human rights and their recognition – as compensation – in all policy formulations. The fact is that everything Bennett campaigned on – from Aboriginal human rights (including women’s rights), to the high levels of Aboriginal incarceration, to the appalling health and educational standards of Aboriginal people, to equal wages and the Trust Fund system, to the fallout from the testing of atomic weapons after the war and, most importantly, her undying abhorrence of Aboriginal child removal – has subsequently come up for redress.

There is also the state’s seizure of her papers at the moment of her death. In the epilogue I chart this moment more carefully. The swiftness of this action was an incredible act of intervention and we must ask why it happened. The question is simply whether the action was a tacit recognition of the veracity of some or all of her claims which, by the late 1950s, had become extraordinarily searing about the policy landscape. While critique of the system of mixed-descent child removal had characterised her efforts before World War II, her most radical claim after it was the genocide of full-descent Aborigines. It is thus important to measure the personal crusade, with all its deeply psychological underpinnings, against the political responses to the same.
It is also because of the removal and loss of her private papers that this story is not about Bennett alone. The fact that I was able to reconstruct it was because her humanitarianism was largely a discursive exercise. She left a paper trail of protest and resistance in a wider context of protest and resistance which is an important part of Australian social and political history. The reconstruction of her efforts as presented in this book is via her extensive archive of letters to like-minded people and organisations and to politicians and bureaucrats around the world. The connections she made, both physically and ideologically, in the cause of her crusade are, therefore, an important part of her story.

Hence, while parts of Bennett’s biography are important, the book is as much the reconstruction of a discursive defence, fragments of which were found in the collections of other humanitarians, their organisations and networks. It is a history of an idea or set of ideas about what constituted justice for Aborigines which took shape in Bennett’s mind and on her pages and which, in turn, helped shape a broader rights agenda. While unfolding her life and her life’s work is central, woven through it are important strands of a story larger than her. It is also about those with whom she connected, as friends and foes, as well as key aspects of a broader humanitarian landscape. In the very least her battle with the Australian state is suggestive of a deeply relevant, as yet untold, story of Australian social and political history.

Indeed, her efforts to found a ‘just relation’ between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people provides an opportunity to explore the role of critique and reform in the processes of colonialism as they were enacted in Australia.\(^1\) Her decision to return to Australia to ‘serve the people who had made her childhood happy’ was, in part, conditioned by concern on the ground where a small, but growing, network of humanitarians were mobilising to the Aboriginal cause.\(^2\) Their concern with Aboriginal dispossession and depopulation led to a critique of contemporary conditions.\(^3\) The important point about that critique was that it emphasised a legacy of colonialism. ‘It is impossible’, Bennett wrote, ‘to take the whole of other peoples’ countries without injuring them’.\(^4\) The other building block was ownership of the problem. Aborigines were dying out not because they were unfit to survive, she said, but because ‘we’ were unfit to be trustees.\(^5\)
In the context of the times this was a radical proposition. It related to her undying view that Britain and Australia were complicit in Aboriginal dispossession. Australian history was rooted in colonialism and must answer to and be responsible for this fact. To overlook it or turn a blind eye represented a grave dereliction of duty. Yet, this was not a view widely endorsed or understood, least of all by the Australian state. In the post-Mabo landscape it is easy to forget that until 1992 the official version of British sovereignty was that they had discovered and then peacefully settled a land belonging to primitive peoples who had underutilised it. Accordingly, there was no question to answer or problem to solve. Successive Australian governments deflected humanitarian criticism suggesting that, as British subjects / Australian citizens, Aboriginal people were under special laws as protective measures. In this way British sovereignty was indivisible and humane. _Terra nullius_ hardly applied. However, it is generally recognised that, as a legal justification for British sovereignty, _terra nullius_ made Australia exceptional in the history of British colonialism.\(^\text{16}\)

Unlike the signing of treaties with Indigenous peoples in other parts of its empire (which ultimately conceded the fact of prior ownership), Britain did not recognise any such rights for Australian Aborigines.\(^\text{17}\) Yet, discussion of Australia’s so-called exceptionalism has elided an important concomitant of the process. The non-recognition of Aboriginal rights obscured the _fact_ of colonialism on Australian soil. Colonisers could indulge in the belief that, while part of the British Empire, we had no empire ourselves. There were colonies but there was no colonialism.\(^\text{18}\) Australia was not held under mandate and no treaties were necessary; therefore the question or problem, if there was one, remained here. There could be no external relevance to the issue. Australian governments were not required to engage with any of the discourses emanating from within the empire about this question.

For Bennett, it was primarily because this issue was not Australia’s alone that a solution should be found. By recognising the broader imperial – and world – parameters of the question she was effectively breaking Australia’s isolationism which, on this question, was ultimately an act of political pragmatism. In truth, those involved in the administration and governance of Aborigines, as with all other policies around race, had long been attuned to precedents elsewhere within the empire and beyond. When the colour problem was considered to be the most burning issue
of the day at the end of the nineteenth century, there was a transnational circulation of emotions, ideas, people and racial knowledge that animated white men’s countries.\textsuperscript{19}

In fact, the Aboriginal problem or native question had occupied European empires long before the so-called colour problem was articulated. It was, according to McNab, ‘the greatest moral difficulty of colonisation’.\textsuperscript{20} In Britain, it was elevated to a national discourse in the context of the granting of self-government to its colonies. From the humanitarian perspective the Aboriginal problem revolved around what this meant for native populations therein. It was about the duty and right policy of colonists and colonial governments towards the native inhabitants of these regions.\textsuperscript{21} From the early nineteenth century there was understood to be a reasonably limited suite of possibilities. As the academic, civil servant and historian Herman Merivale put it in 1841, there were three alternatives for the ultimate destiny of native peoples: extermination, insulation (reservations) and amalgamation (gradual union leading to assimilation).\textsuperscript{22}

Looked at in this way, the various policies enacted by Australian governments – protection, assimilation, self-determination, reconciliation – belong to this much longer tradition. They were/are responses to the perennial empire-wide coloniser question of ‘what to do with the Blacks’, as Bennett put it.\textsuperscript{23} The Protection legislation which was enacted in the Australian colonies from the second half of the nineteenth century was the governments’ response to a problem that was becoming particularly acute on the frontiers of settlement. While genuflecting to imperial humanitarian discourses of justice and humane treatment, compensation and land for native inhabitants, Protection was also about the containment of the problem and the humanitarians who exposed it.

Indeed, Protection legislation in Australia was preceded by what could only be described as a crisis of governance on this question. This was true of the southern colonies of Tasmania and Victoria where patterns of settlement represented a rapid and violent takeover of land. But it was perhaps even more obvious in the Western Australian and Queensland colonies, particularly in the northern regions, where law enforcement failed, corruption was rife and governments colluded or conspired to protect settler interests. Symptomatic of this were intense political battles between pastoralists and humanitarians, particularly in the far northwest and northeast, which showed deep suspicion at best and outright hatred at
worst. Though a localised expression of what was happening elsewhere in the empire, the Protection legislation was not about identifying and settling native interests. While a response to settler hunger for land and humanitarian critiques, and to prevent the charge of slavery, Protection was a means of governments taking ownership and control of the problem.

It was not long into the new century before the problem reared itself again. World War I marked a turning point on this question both here and in Britain. It represented a line of demarcation with the past. In Britain, this was conditioned by the changing face of colonial policy in Africa and Britain’s pivotal role in the League of Nations, where native peoples were identified as a sacred trust of civilisation who were to be treated fairly, justly and humanely. Australian critics and reformers had always been part of a broader transnational circulation of ideas and people on this question. After the war a network of groups evolved across the southern states to call for better management of the problem and an enlightened administration.

Highlighting Australia’s mandatory responsibilities under the League of Nations, they questioned the contradictions between Australia’s external and internal policies on this question. They formed lobbies, study groups, protection societies and networks. Comprising Christian humanists, missionaries, women reformers and scientists, these groups saw their task as the reform of government policy and the education of public opinion. They also had a specific set of demands which revolved around reforming laws, practices and governance. While Protection was government policy, these groups were lobbying for an alternative, more professional form of protection. They were, as Bennett styled them, ‘the growing number of enlightened humane Australians’ who felt ‘that the contemporary position of Aborigines was unworthy of a great nation’.

While Bennett’s ideas gained traction in this context, few humanitarians in Australia mirrored her knowledge, commitment or zealotry. Few were in a position to make the Aboriginal cause their life’s work. In 1930, the year her landmark book was published, Bennett arrived in Australia from her home in London, aged forty-nine, to undertake this work. Her husband had died three years earlier and she was childless and of independent means. A dedicated Christian, she was also a supporter of the Labour Party in Britain and had been exposed to the rise and fall of the radical critique of imperial policy there. She was schooled in the principles of imperial humanitarianism. Faith in its central tenets,
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particularly benevolent trusteeship, was what connected her promotion of indirect rule for Aboriginal administration in Australia in the interwar years and the International Labour Organization’s Convention 107 for the same in the post-war years. Spawned from her own colonial experience of the Australian frontier and of Aborigines, Bennett dedicated the rest of her life to what she defined as the Aboriginal cause: their justice, freedom and humanity.

If Bennett was unique, she was not alone. In her study of Charles Duguid, a friend of Bennett’s and fellow Aboriginal rights campaigner, historian Rani Kerin argues that his exceptionalism among reformers was his capacity to implement solutions to the problem. A medical doctor, a family man and a leading member of the Presbyterian church, Duguid’s respectability goes some way in explaining his success. In contrast, Bennett’s capacity to affect change in this way was limited, despite her respectability. She was female, widowed, had no family (was not a mother) and, while Christian and working on a mission, she saw her task as an educator and remained, in large part, self-funded in this work. Where Duguid was respected and could get the ear of governments, Bennett was reviled. They attempted to silence her.

However, Bennett’s ideas continued to influence a developing rights discourse. Shaping much of what he saw as vital to Aboriginal interests, Duguid was strongly influenced by her. In the late 1930s her critique of absorption, the government policy designed to biologically infuse Aboriginal people of mixed descent into the majority population, helped shape and propel a left-wing and feminist critique of the same. Her knowledge and ideas helped to maintain British humanitarian interest in Australian conditions through the early to middle part of the twentieth century. Furthermore, in the 1950s and, 60s, Bennett’s writings continued to fuel a critique of government policy, particularly her 1930 book, which became something of a bible among younger activists who styled her their ‘spiritual mother’.

Kerin suggests that what worked for Duguid was his moderation. On the whole, he was not radical. The same cannot be said of Bennett, whose radicalism, by contrast, was not necessarily what made her exceptional. If she was exceptional it was because she managed to combine both moderation and radicalism. Her active involvement in the native question in Australia coincided with a time in British colonial policy where the
fundamental question was, in Bernard Porter’s words, ‘what was and what should be the position of tropical countries and peoples in relation to the industrial civilization of the West’. In the context of the late 1920s, Bennett sided with the reformist ideals of interwar British humanitarianism which were enshrined in the ideals of indirect rule: ‘systematic use of the customary institutions of the people as agencies of local rule’. When compared with the long-standing policy positions on this question, identified by Merivale earlier, indirect rule was a provocative, albeit conservative and self-serving, new solution.

We might say that Bennett was radical in applying this approach to Australian conditions in the first place. Very few humanitarians in Australia sought to do the same and those who did were strongly influenced by her. None of the lobby groups of the interwar period, save the Aboriginal Protection League in Adelaide, actively promoted indirect rule. Governments certainly didn’t, even at the time of considering how to populate and develop the tropical north in the interwar years. The humanitarians constituted a ‘body of disaffection’ in the way that British critics and reformers did at this time. They felt that settlement and development in Australia had raised disturbing questions about the status of Aboriginal people. Yet, while critical of government policies, they were not anti-colonial. On the whole, as in Britain, they promoted reform of the system rather than its abolition. As in Britain, they were interested in the question of how to govern a native population justly and humanely.

What made Bennett’s approach radical was that embedded in it was an anti-colonial critique which stemmed from some of the more radical antecedents of indirect rule. As Porter points out, indirect rule may have been a pragmatic colonial policy but it had been anticipated by the critical theories of empire promoted by the left in the 1880s and ‘90s. Important to these was an economic theory of imperialism which equated colonial expansion with capitalist exploitation. Such a view saw socialist politicians such as Edmund Dene Morel link the loss of land (peasant proprietorship) with the loss of freedom of contract (labour) in places like the Congo.

Morel’s campaign against slavery in the Congo Free State had a profound impact on Bennett. Part of Morel’s success was his ability to use the British press to publicise the atrocities of Leopold’s rule. As part of his reading public, Bennett absorbed the sensational politics around
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his demands for reform in the Congo at an important stage in her life. Even if she was not, at that point, deeply engaged with the Aboriginal question, there is no doubt that it formed an important impression on her developing consciousness. She later quoted Morel and had read his polemical tract, *Black Man’s Burden* (1920). Furthermore, like Morel, she later used the press to publicise her views and, like him, her dogged pursuit of justice for Aborigines earned her a reputation in government circles, as the rapid removal of her papers after her death suggests. This was a remarkable moment. In a questionable exercise of power, the state stepped in to confiscate the personal papers of a citizen. Bennett had died. Were they attempting to bury her legacy too?

It was in an attempt to recover her papers that the threads of her advocacy, as they appear in this book, became apparent. Those threads give some clues as to why the state acted in this way. In the post World War II era, the economic aspects of Bennett’s critique, along with its anti-racism, came into their own. They found a more receptive audience in developments within the Aboriginal rights movement, where questions of land and labour were increasingly taking a more prominent place and where justice and freedom for Aboriginal people were being understood in economic terms. Along with the growing global decolonisation movement, the fractious politics around American civil rights and anti-Apartheid movements in Africa, and the intensification of the Cold War, the espousal of Aboriginal freedom and rights was regarded with suspicion.

The state’s intervention is salutary in another way, too. Over recent years there has been a strong critique of rights-based discourses, particularly those concerned with human rights, in government circles, within academia and in a range of other forums, in Australia and elsewhere. Mary Bennett’s story exposes something which is often sacrificed in these critiques. Not only do they elide important parts of the history, they also work to obscure the battles and tensions which advocacy of rights have exposed. They obscure the different responses to the question. On the one hand, Bennett was no more committed to the advocacy of Aboriginal rights than the state was to shutting her up. On the other hand, humanitarian efforts around the Aboriginal question were not only the preserve of her and those who shared her views. All humanitarians and reformers were driven by a conception (their own) of what was right and good for Aboriginal people but there were significant differences in ideas.
and methods. As in approaches to the native question elsewhere, divisions emerged over its solution.\footnote{41}

One of the most marked divisions was between those who worked for reform within government and administrative ranks and those, like Bennett, who critiqued it from the outside. This is important because humanitarianism was an outgrowth of and justification for imperialism;\footnote{42} however, it also manifested as opposition to colonial sentiments and actions, often simultaneously.\footnote{43} While it is important to deconstruct the power which underpins noble enterprises, as Michael Barnett suggests, it is also important to consider how humanitarians have rethought the ethics of care.\footnote{44} In recovering Bennett’s papers I found a network of reformers who clearly felt marginal, defensive and part of an oppositional movement. Bennett’s sending of a large parcel of letters to Charles Duguid was an example of her maintaining links with a fellow traveller in an otherwise hostile environment. Letters between reformers fashioned a discursive circuit of alliance and protest. They were compilations of information, facts and evidence, as well as elucidations of policy, reform and care. They were chains of trust and friendship, support and defence in the cause.

Under the weight of new imperial, postcolonial and transnational histories, there has been a growing interest in humanitarian history in Australia. Most of this work has focused on the nineteenth century, not least because this was a period of intense scrutiny by the colonial office into conditions in Australia and throughout the empire, sparked by the House of Commons Select Committee On Aborigines (1835–37). With this moment as a focus a handful of historians have begun to unpick the social, political and cultural investments and transnational meanings of humanitarianism in the nineteenth century.\footnote{45} Recent explorations on anti-slavery and its legacies are opening the lens still further, exploring the trajectory of anti-slavery critique from the late nineteenth century to the present.\footnote{46} Paisley explicitly focuses on Bennett’s work on conditions of Aboriginal labour in the 1930s, particularly slavery and forced labour, to draw attention to the international dimensions of the Aboriginal question in the interwar years.\footnote{47}

This is a valuable interjection because it takes Bennett’s work as a humanitarian seriously. Important for the story told here is Paisley’s suggestion concerning the potential link between humanitarian critique and
major shifts in government policy. The story told in this book – Bennett’s story – is suggestive of a history of humanitarian critique and containment. In this sense humanitarian critique was a double-edged sword: it both raised concern in the public sphere and provided a space for governments to take control of the problem and steer it in the direction it wanted to go while looking reformist and responsive.

This is what happened in 1937 when government bureaucrats agreed that future policy would rest on the absorption of the mixed-descent community. This was in direct response to at least two decades of humanitarian critique, in which Bennett’s interjections were among the most critical of all, as well as concerted Aboriginal resistance in the north and the south. However, the mid-century policy shift from protection to absorption represented a profound contraction of Bennett’s and the broader humanitarian community’s concerns and demands. It was a bureaucratic response to a humanitarian crisis but, in focusing on a solution to the half-caste problem, it failed to recognise what for those like Bennett was at the heart of the crisis: the position of the remaining full-bloods and the urgent need to prevent their extinction. The recovery of Bennett’s defence of Aboriginal rights in this book uncovers a powerful humanitarian angst across the middle years of the century concerning the fate of the full-bloods who, at least up to the end of World War II, constituted the majority Aboriginal population. Despite this fact, the demographic evidence showed a slow decrease from the 1920s, when the full-bloods constituted 82.3 per cent of the total Aboriginal population, to 1944, when they constituted 66.2 per cent.48

The ideal of saving the race propelled Bennett’s crusade and it was what provided the important link between her and the South Australian Aborigines’ League, with whom she maintained a connection until her death. Bennett’s story thus allows us to consider the meanings, investments and outcomes of humanitarian interjection on this issue. Part of this is recovering a history of such, but the abrupt removal of Bennett’s papers also forces us to consider the relationship between governments and humanitarians acting outside governments which, in their twentieth-century guise, represented something new in the policy framework.

In his history of humanitarianism Michael Barnett asks that we decouple humanitarianism and human rights. He notes that while there are similarities, they are not synonymous:
Human rights relies on a discourse of rights, humanitarianism a discourse of needs. Human rights focuses on legal discourse and frameworks, whereas humanitarianism shifts attention to moral codes and sentiments. Human rights typically focuses on the long term goal of eliminating the causes of suffering, humanitarianism on the urgent goal of keeping people alive.49

According to this definition, this book is about human rights. In recovering Bennett’s advocacy it tracks a campaign which drew on a discourse of rights, utilised legal frameworks and focused on the long term goal of eliminating the causes of Aboriginal suffering. Bennett was a human rights activist in Kenneth Cmiel’s terms because she made claims across borders in the name of basic rights.50 The chronology of this book, from the 1920s, when the possibility of Aboriginal human rights was first mooted, to the 1960s, when an attempt was made to have the Aboriginal question raised before the United Nations, charts this human rights history. These developments largely framed Bennett’s activist career from the publication of her first human rights treatise in 1930 to her last four years before her death.

The book also tracks a discourse of needs, moral codes and sentiments and the urgent goal of keeping people alive (in saving Aboriginal people from extinction). In this sense, then, Bennett’s story demonstrates the close connection between the rise of humanitarianism as a political project and the rise of human rights. Yet, Barnett is instructive. He stresses the need to consider humanitarianism as a morally complicated creature, a ‘flawed hero defined by the passions, politics and power of its times even as it tries to rise above them’.51 Indeed, despite her efforts to rise above them, the power and politics of her time not only shaped her efforts but practically buried her. In her story is reflected the heated contestation over Aboriginal people throughout the twentieth century.

Bennett’s story is suggestive of Barnett’s qualification. On the one hand, she spoke from the coloniser side, from a position of power, privilege and authority even if, as a leading public humanitarian critic, her power was circumscribed. Her work among missionaries meant that she was necessarily embedded in colonising practices and discourses and her deep appreciation of Aboriginal humanity elided – in part and when it suited – that which was central to: Aborigines’ own cultural and social
distinctiveness. The people who made her childhood happy were not the Wongutha and Wongkai of the eastern goldfields of Western Australia, with whom she ended up working so closely and who helped define her reform agenda, but the Dalleburra in north Queensland, the people of the grasslands rather than the desert. Nor did the former ask for her help or intervention – initially – despite doing so eventually.

Yet, while she might be construed as someone who used her privilege to speak for Aboriginal people, she spent much of her life trying to give voice and representation to them and they gravitated to her for the same. She reflected on how close alliances with Aboriginal people and their lived conditions generated empathy with their plight:

> The realization that our natives need complete emancipation and representation comes but slowly even to those few who are spending their lives with them teaching and preaching and nursing and helping them in other ways, but the realization comes as one experiences WITH them the suffering which they are made to endure by the cruel discrimination of the various Aboriginal Acts and Ordinances and the often irresponsible officers who administer them. [Bennett’s emphasis]

Thus, following Barnett, one reading of Bennett’s advocacy of Aboriginal human rights might be that, as the statement above attests, she saw the Aboriginal problem as her own. Yet, if her crusade was an act of atonement, much of it was similar to the demands of Aboriginal activists themselves. And it was remarkably prescient. She might have been a product of her time but she advocated things which have only recently been understood as important to Aboriginal well-being. There is nothing, for example, in the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007) that she would not have agreed with or, at some stage, articulated. Parts of it she had argued for since the 1930s including, importantly, the rights and protection of Aboriginal women and children. Indeed, many of Bennett’s ideas resonate with those emanating from some Aboriginal spokespeople and leaders today.

By using the contours of Bennett’s biography, this book will build on the picture of individual activist lives begun by Reynolds, Rowse, Haskins, Marcus, Kerin, Lake and Paisley with a view to considering
what the individual story tells us about the humanitarian project in twentieth-century Australia more generally. In particular, recovery of her story helps to historicise human rights in Australia, a task which has become more urgent in recent times. Not only have some Aboriginal spokespeople and other commentators demanded that policy be framed in a human rights context, the Australian government has faced questioning at the United Nations about its Indigenous policies. Furthermore, the National Human Rights Action Plan, commissioned by the Labor federal government in 2010, recognised that ‘lasting improvements in human rights ultimately depend on the government and the people of a particular country demanding to take action to bring about positive change’. The recovery of Bennett’s attempts to bring about positive change is therefore timely and of national significance.