

18

Lifeways to Massacre: A History of Encounter across Dampier Archipelago

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From the seventeenth century, Murujuga became known to the world, first entering onto maps of maritime explorers. Exploration was an essential precursor in the steps towards colonisation and invasion.

From the 1860s, following the establishment of the British colony in Western Australia, the Dampier Archipelago became a significant part of the colonial world. For Yaburara and Mardudunhera people of the archipelago, white colonisation spiralled into violence and culminated in the 1868 massacre which became known by the same name as its most productive pearlshell fisheries – Flying Foam. And yet, life in the islands continued for Aboriginal people after the massacre. In this chapter we consider the historical accounts of Murujuga, which document Aboriginal and settler lifeways, and the tragic events of 1868 and the insidious effects of measles and smallpox.

These are events documented through the eyes of Europeans unfamiliar with the people they met, not speaking a common language, and burdened by racial prejudices. There is little room here for the accounts of Aboriginal people of their own history. Nonetheless, these do provide significant information which is deeply relevant to our understanding of the ways in which the islands were important to Aboriginal people, and the manner in which Yaburara people dealt with the arrival of outsiders and their diseases – which include curiosity, disdain, incredulity and resistance.

Explorers of the North-west Coast

The earliest maritime visitors to the North West were vessels of the Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie (VOC, or United East India Company). The Dutch route to their ports and factories in island South-east Asia involved crossing the Indian Ocean from the Cape of Good Hope at latitude 40 degrees south, then turning north to sail towards Java. The limits of navigation meant that some ships sailed closer than expected to the then largely unknown Australian continent, resulting in now famous

shipwrecks: *Batavia* (1629), *Vergulde Draeck* (1656), *Zuytdorp* (1712) and *Zeewijk* (1727). In 1622 the wreck of the *Trial*, an English East Indiaman following the Dutch route, resulted in much confusion over the location of what became known as Trial Rocks off Barrow Island, which remained open to speculation for centuries.

In 1618 the supercargo aboard the vessel VOC *Zeewolf* described that they:

found land ... in 20°15', a low laying shore of great length. We do not know whether it is unbroken coastline or made up of islands. Only the Lord knows the real state of affairs. It would seem never to have been made or discovered by anyone before us, as we never heard of such a discovery, and the chart shows nothing but open ocean at this place ... this land is a firm point to be made by ships coming here with the Eastern monsoon in order to get a fixed course for Java. (Heeres 2006 [1899])

This would be very close to Murujuga which is at latitude -20.7° .

A decade later, the existence of the islands of the Dampier Archipelago, Barrow Island and the Montebellos were included on a VOC map produced by Hessel Gerritsz in 1628 (Figure 18.1 and Figure 18.2). The north-west coast was termed Eendracht's Land and De Witt's Lands, after Fredrikszoon De Witt on board the vessel *Vyanen*,

which sailed the coast between Onslow to north of Nickol Bay (de la Rue 1979: 2). Abel Tasman's mapping and assessment of the northern Australian coast in 1644 ensured the Dutch remained largely uninterested in the continent, at least as a prospect for settlement, and Tasman's map of the continent remained uncontested until Captain Cook's voyages of 1770.

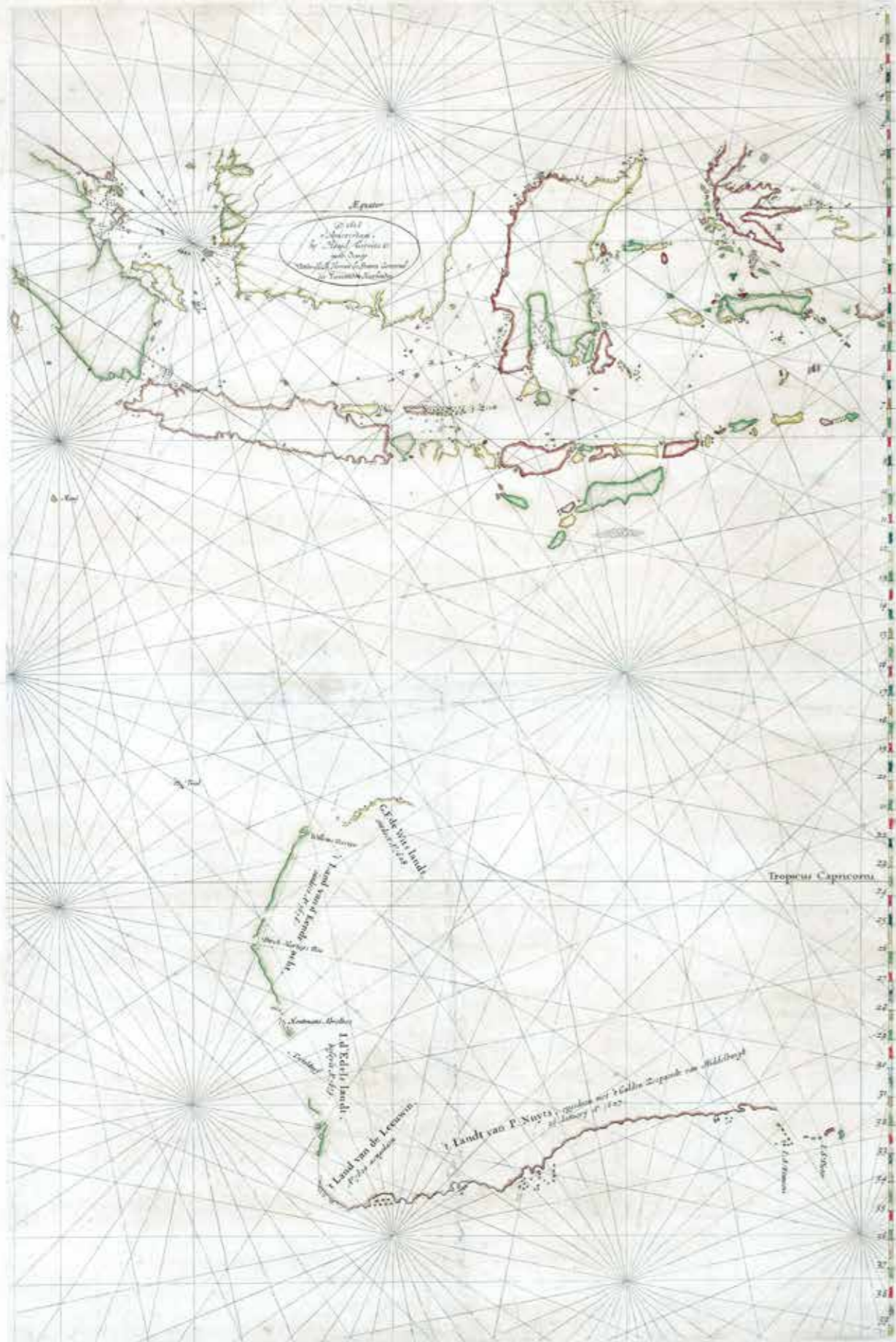


Figure 18.2. Hessel Gerritsz, Chart of the Indies and New Holland, 1628 (Wikimedia Commons, public domain).

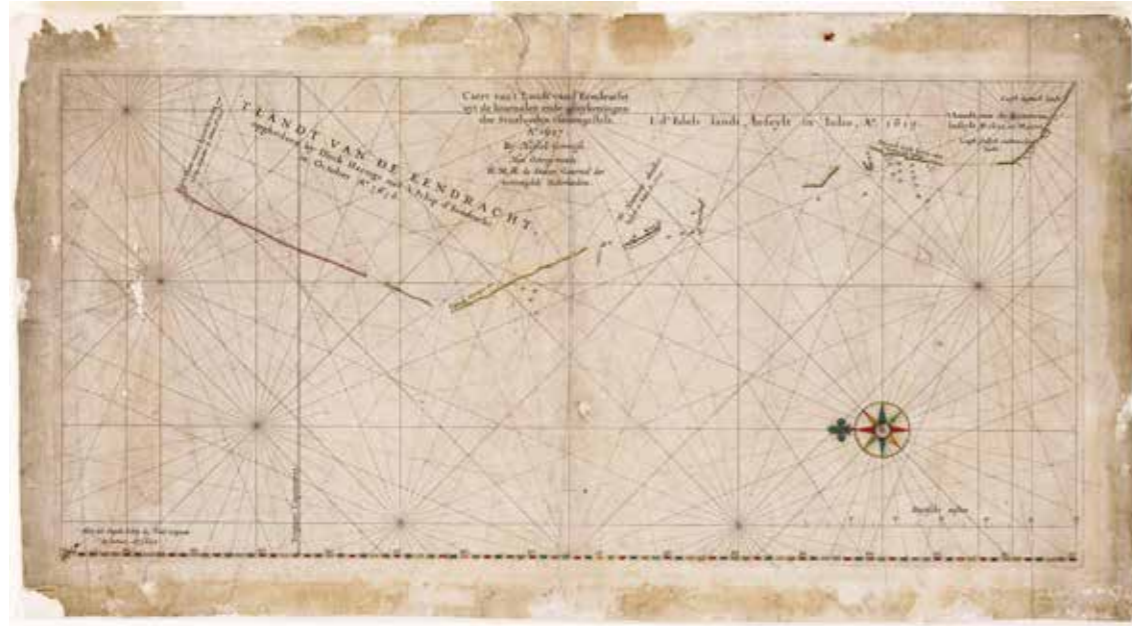


Figure 18.1. Hessel Gerritsz, Map of the Land of the Eendracht, 1627 (Wikimedia Commons, public domain).

The earliest European account of Murujuga was by William Dampier, after whom the archipelago is named. Dampier was a privateer, navigator and naturalist who circumnavigated the world twice, first visiting Western Australia – then named New Holland and Eendrachtsland – in 1688, before returning in 1699 (Dampier 1699). This latter voyage took him to Dirk Hartog Island and Murujuga, where he landed, and named the northern islands of

Murujuga the Rosemary Islands (Figure 18.3). In this era of exploration there was great demand for collections and observations of the wider world and its people. In both Shark Bay and Murujuga he made natural history collections, including plant specimens which survive at Oxford University (George 1999; Marner 2020). Dampier thought that one species of plant resembled rosemary, but it was native *Olearia axillaris* (Asteraceae).

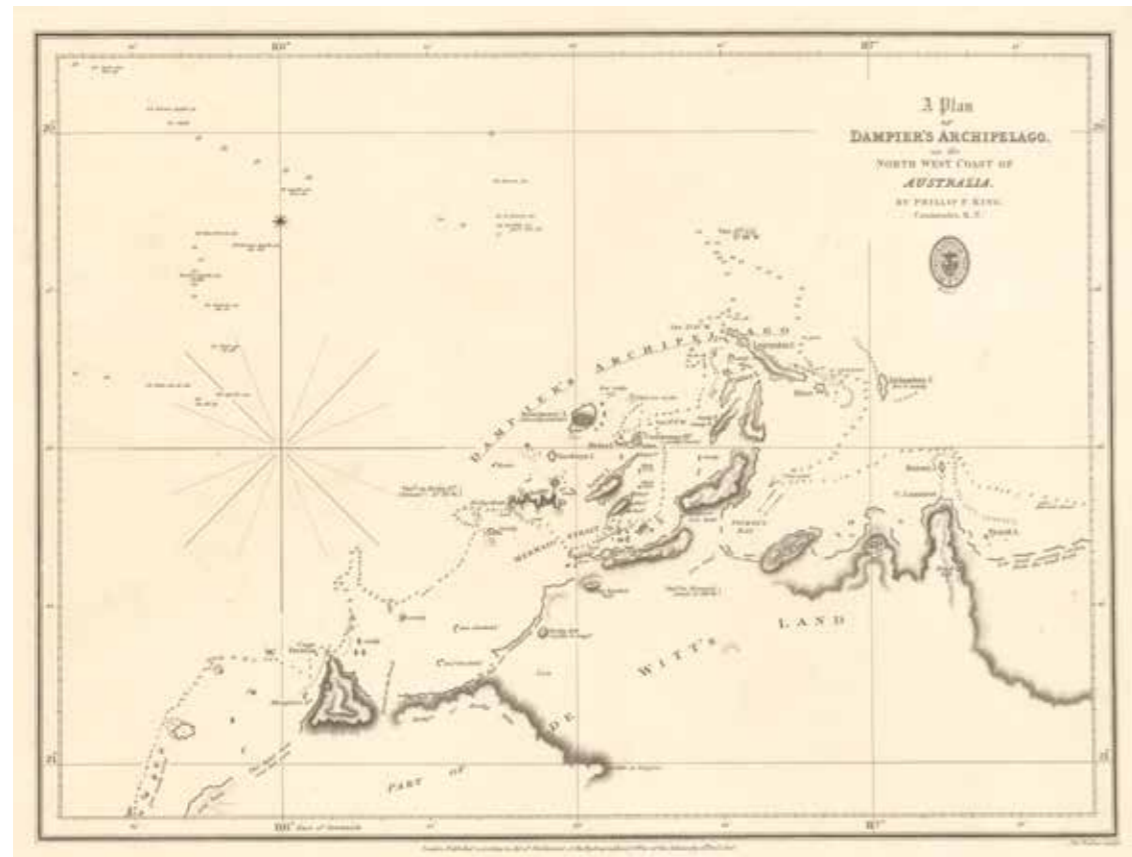


Figure 18.3. Phillip Parker King & John Walker, A plan of Dampier's Archipelago on the north west coast of Australia, 1826. (In MAP British Admiralty Special Map Col./75, National Library of Australia. <http://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-230979618>, retrieved 19 July 2023.)

While it is impossible to determine exactly where Dampier went in the islands, he described finding an anchorage on the eastern side of a larger island which had a raised outcrop to its northern end. This does not fit well with being Enderby Island, as its high point is at the western end as one approached from the ocean, but may well be Malus or Rosemary island. Dampier was interested in finding fresh water, and also Aboriginal people to determine what valuable resources were known. However, he did not report meeting any Yaburara people, although he did find the vegetation burned on the island where they landed, which he attributed to people. He described seeing fires on an island towards the east (if they were on Rosemary, this may have been Malus, East Lewis or conceivably Gidley Island), but the prevailing wind prevented them from investigat-

ing. Instead, they left the archipelago and sailed north, finding much-needed fresh water in Roebuck Bay.

It would be over a century before Europeans again visited Murujuga, at which time encounters with Yaburara people were documented. In 1801 and 1803 the French navigator Nicolas Baudin approached the outer islands of the archipelago. While in 1801 the *Géographe* only saw the archipelago from afar, being wary of sand banks, reefs and currents, in March 1803 the *Géographe* sailed past a second time with the *Casuarina* (commanded by Louis Freycinet). Freycinet 'examined the islands of the Dampier Archipelago' (Leschenault 1801–1802, trans. Gibbard: 301) sufficient to name it after Dampier, and to name Malus, Legendre, Hauy and Delambre islands across its northern extent. Théodore Leschenault's journal describes seeing large fires:

We continued exploring the north-west coast for some time, and passed within sight of an extensive archipelago. It is of vital importance that a detailed reconnaissance be undertaken among these islands, as such work may well cause the coast of the New Holland mainland to be redrawn far to the south of where it currently appears on the charts. I leave it to navigators and geographers to judge of the importance of an observation of this kind. These islands present a remarkable sight, as they have the appearance of upturned bowls. We saw a great many fires as we sailed along this vast stretch of coast, which is thought to form part of the mainland. We were further struck by the sight of a large area being consumed by a blaze of astonishing intensity. We were of the view that this conflagration must have begun when the natives left one of their fires untended and it had spread to surrounding trees. (Leschenault 1801–1802, trans. Gibbard: 12)



Figure 18.4. 'View of Mermaid Strait from Enderby Island (Rocky Head) Feb 25 [1818]', in Phillip Parker King – album of drawings and engravings, 1802–1902, Mitchell Library, PXC767.

The next documented European visitor was Phillip Parker King, whose hydrographic survey of the coastline (1817–22) involved four circumnavigations of Australia. As part of these voyages he visited 'Dampier's Archipelago' from 25 February to 5 March 1818 (King 1827; Paterson et al. 2019b). King's vessel, the HMS *Mermaid*, carried a small crew, including Boongaree, a Guringai man from Port Jackson (Sydney), as a cultural intermediary and fellow explorer. The crew's survey and natural history collecting involved midshipman John Septimus Roe – who would in 1829 return to Western Australia as

[We] climbed the summit of Rocky Head before the sun rose; in the ascent we crossed several deep ravines which, together with the hills, were thickly covered with a wiry grass [spinifex] growing over and amongst heaps of rocks that were piled up in all directions as if it had been done purposely; the greater part of the surface of the island being covered with these stones, we had a considerable difficulty in advancing, and it was not without some labour that we arrived at the summit of the hill. Here the view was very extensive ... The land on which we were appeared to be the south-western-most island of a considerable archipelago. (King 1827, Vol. 1: 36)

From his vantage point, not knowing the names of any places, King named Enderby Island and Lewis Island to commemorate his foster mothers in London (Hordern 1997: 79). The crew discovered a rock hole full of water, from which they collected 'eight or ten gallons' (King 1827, Vol. 1: 39). As they explored, one of the complement, presumably Roe (Paterson et al. 2019b), made a watercolour of the *Mermaid* at anchor in the straits that now carry its name, and the islands beyond (Figure 18.4). The crew noted the rich marine resources, describing fish, sea snakes, turtles, sharks and trepang. Boongaree speared a parrot fish and mullet, and helped Cunningham collect shells. While they did not meet Yaburara people on that first day, they knew people were

As we advanced, three natives were seen in the water, apparently wading from an island in the centre of the strait towards Lewis Island: the course was immediately altered to intercept them, but as we approached, it was discovered that each native was seated on a log of wood, which he propelled through the water by paddling with his hands. (King 1827, Vol. 1: 35)

Despite the cries of concern King dispatched a boat, and they managed to cut off one man who eventually was pulled on board by his hair – having tried several times to escape capture by swimming underwater – and taken with his watercraft to the *Mermaid* where he was

the Surveyor General of the Swan River Colony – and Allan Cunningham, a botanist who, like Dampier, made collections of plants and geological specimens, including Aboriginal artefacts. Some of these collections entered the British Museum and survive in the Natural History Museum in London (Shellam and Paterson 2020).

The *Mermaid* approached Murujuga from the south, anchoring off the southern shore of Enderby Island (Figure 18.4). The crew alighted on 25 February, and Phillip Parker King climbed to a high point to gain a view of the inner islands of the Dampier Archipelago:

living in the islands and relying on marine and terrestrial foods: 'The tracks of natives and their fireplaces were everywhere visible and around the latter the bones of kangaroos and fishes were strewed' (King 1827, Vol. 1: 36). Our project discovered a scratched image of a sailing ship (see this volume, Chapter 5), which we argue is a depiction of the *Mermaid* made by one of King's crew (Paterson et al. 2019b).

The next day, as King sailed through the Mermaid Strait he observed that Lewis Island was actually two islands: now named East and West Lewis Islands. He met a group of Yaburara people using small mangrove watercraft in the Intercourse Islands, revealing the nature of maritime access around the archipelago (Figure 18.5):

measured against the mast and observed by the crew. King states that the appearance of Boongaree partially mollified the captured man. He was released back to the water, with a bag, axe and some beads, and he rejoined a group of 40 people on a small island.



Figure 18.5. King's illustration of a Yaburara man and his watercraft. Art Gallery of Western Australia: 2000/0041, Phillip Parker King, Native of Dampier's Archipelago, on his floating log, not dated, pen, ink and wash and scratching out on card, 7.9 x 11.5 cm (sheet). (The State Art Collection, The Art Gallery of Western Australia. Transferred from the State Library Board of Western Australia, 2000).

From this episode and encounters the next day it was clear that Yaburara people were camped around Murujuga, as evidenced by their fires. The British described their huts, 'which were of most miserable con-

struction, being nothing more than a bush stuck in the ground, and forming only a very indifferent shade'. The sailors described the watercraft construction in detail:

It appears that the only vehicle by which these savages transport their families and chattels across the water is a log of wood; that which we had brought alongside with our captive friend was made of the stem of a mangrove tree; but as it was not long enough for the purpose, two or three short logs were neatly and even curiously joined together end to end, and so formed one piece that was sufficient to carry and buoyant enough to support the weight of two people. The end is rudely ornamented, and is attached to the extremity by the same contrivance as the joints of the main stem, only that the two are not brought close together. The joint is contrived by driving three pegs into the end of the log, and by bending them, they are made to enter opposite holes in the part that is to be joined on; and as the pegs cross and bend against each other, they form a sort of elastic connexion, which strongly retains the two together. When it is used, they sit astride and move it along by paddling with their hands, keeping their feet upon the end of the log, by which they probably guide its course. Such are the shifts to which the absence of larger timber has reduced these simple savages: they show that man is naturally a navigating animal; and this floating log, which may be called a marine-velocipede, is, I should suppose, the extreme case of the poverty of savage boat-building all round the world. (King 1827, Vol. 1: 43–44)

The following day, February 27, another set of encounters occurred, culminating in a meeting on a beach, on what was consequently named the Intercourse Islands, and shown on King's chart map (Figure 18.3). During an

encounter with a group of Yaburara men, Boongaree acted as a cultural icebreaker, removing his shirt to show his initiation scars:

Boongaree was of course the object of their greatest attention: the fashion in which his body was scarred was the subject of particular remark; and when he pointed at the sea, to show them whence he came, they set up a shout of admiration and surprise. (King 1827, Vol. 1: 47)

The men were presented with an axe, some chisels and other tools, and in return some turtle meat was offered to them, and rejected by the British – 'He ridiculed our repugnance to partake of a piece of the raw gut of a turtle which he offered to us, and to expose our folly,

ate a piece ...'. King asked for the location of water and 'they all simultaneously pointed to an island bearing North-East from the one on which we were' (possibly East Intercourse Island, if they were on the Burrup). During this meeting the women remained nearby, and

hidden, and the Yaburara maintained a defensive backup, as observed by the British: 'several natives were seen from the cutter concealed close to us, armed with spears ready to repel any attack we might have made, and to defend the women and children of their tribe'. King noted they did not understand any attempts to speak English,

There was no mischievous feeling in their conduct towards us, for we were in their power, and had they been inclined, they might have speared the whole of our party before a musket could have been fired by us. (King 1827, Vol. 1: 48)

King and the crew of the *Mermaid* stayed for four more days in the archipelago, anchoring on 1 March off Malus Island to climb (and name) Courtney Head for the

'The same signs of rain water having been running in considerable bodies and standing in the hollows, appear here as throughout the archipelago, but not a drop of fresh water now exists!', despite attempts at digging for water – 'Arriving under some hills, consisting chiefly of rugged heaps of ironstone, we dug in the valleys between each range for water, but our people were prevented from penetrating deep, it being very shallow and rocky. The idea was therefore abandoned of procuring the invaluable desideratum by such means.' (Cunningham cited in Lee 1925: 343)

This reminds us of why early European visitors were keen to learn from Aboriginal people where water was accessible, as indicated by Cunningham again:

A friendly interview would be very desirable, as it might be the means of discovering the spot where fresh water is to be procured, the existence of which the very presence of these poor creatures, with their wives and children, plainly indicates. (Cunningham cited in Lee 1925: 339)

The observations of King are a critical juncture in the life of the archipelago. They reveal that the occupation of the inner islands occurred in the typically wetter parts of the year by family groups, detail Aboriginal houses and watercraft, and indicate campsites and recent tracks on Enderby Island. The reaction of Yaburara people strongly suggests that in 1818 they were largely unfamiliar with

further supporting the hypothesis that there were no sustained cross-cultural encounters before 1818. The British sailed towards the next island to collect some water, but were met by another group who were not willing to allow landfall. The British were outnumbered and chose not to land:

purposes of navigation. They tried to recover water but faced the harsh realities of fresh water in the islands, as described by Cunningham:

Europeans, their vessels, their forms of exchange, the English language, and the use of Indigenous intermediaries (Shellam 2019). If so, this suggests that American and other whalers were yet to arrive in the islands, although this would soon occur. Whales that Allan Cunningham observed 'spouting' during the King expedition would soon lure American whalers to Murujuga.

Early Maritime Industries

The first British colonies were established far from Murujuga – in the south-west of the continent at King George Sound (Albany) in 1826 and then at Swan River (Fremantle and Perth) in 1829. Despite the distance there were colonial-era voyages along the north-west coast that came close to Murujuga. The most constant early maritime visitors to Murujuga were whalers, particularly American whalers who described the Indian Ocean and Southern Ocean as the 'New Holland Ground'. The most populous were American whalers from the north-east of the USA (Paterson 2006; Blue 2019), although whalers also originated from ports in France,

We saw few natives, eight or ten perhaps, and they were perfectly nude, and were as near the brute as could be. The only weapons they carried were bones from a bird's wing stuck through a hole in the end of their nose. That they used to kill turtles, in this way: They have a dry log which is about ten feet long and eight inches thick which they straddle in the water. Paddling with their hands and kicking with their feet, they get through the water quite rapidly, and when they espy a turtle sleeping

England and elsewhere in colonial Australia. Surviving whaling logbooks and early newspaper accounts in the colony indicate that whalers frequented the Dampier Archipelago from the turn of the nineteenth century (Paterson 2006). The peak for American whaling at Murujuga (known to them as the 'Rosemary Islands') dates to the 1840s–1860s and was focused on humpback and sperm whales (Wace and Lovett 1973: 13; Langdon 1978, 1984; Gibbs 2010: 368; Paterson 2006).

Murujuga Aboriginal people hunting were observed by American whalers in the archipelago, as detailed by an American crewman in the 1840s:

on the surface, they approach noiselessly and catch it by one of the flippers, and turn him over on to his back. They then draw the peg out of their nose, and run it through the turtle's eyes. This soon kills the turtle, when they tow it ashore, and have a royal feast. (Williams 1894: 44)

In these encounters, Yaburara also had access to a vast amount of whale meat from the Americans:

When ships are taking whales, the carcasses, having been stripped of the blubber, frequently float ashore, and the natives strip the flesh from the bones for food. They paddle off to vessels when the whalers are 'cutting in' a whale and eat the scraps the sailors throw over to them. (Williams 1894: 44)

This project has demonstrated the use of the islands by whalers via two historical inscriptions found on Rosemary and West Lewis islands (chapters 7 and 9) which record the presence of the crews of the *Connecticut* in 1842 and the *Delta* in 1849. There is no information about the journey of the *Connecticut*, other than its departure from New Bedford in 1841 and its presence in the archipelago in August 1842. Records in the New Bedford Whaling Museum, Massachusetts, reveal that Jacob Anderson aboard the *Connecticut*, the main author of the Rosemary Island inscription, was African American (aged 23), and this inscription reveals he was literate. The surviving *Delta* logbook does not include the landfall on West Lewis Island on 12 July 1849 (the date inscribed on the island). Yet there are other landfalls intimated: for 'liberty'; water (on two days, 30 April and 1 May 1849); hunting, including a 'kangaroo' (probably a wallaby; 5 July 1849); and to collect firewood (Paterson et al. 2019a: 230).

The direct evidence for American landfalls is important, although hardly surprising given the need for water and fresh food. The islands may have provided

at sundown, fires were seen first upon Rosemary and then upon Enderby Islands; now these were not single fires, but large groups of fires indicating the presence of great numbers of natives. These people must be near water on one if not both of the islands. (*Exploration of the north-west coast* 1864, 10 June)

a vantage to watch for whales – both locations for the engraved panels overlook passages of water between islands through which whales would have migrated. Whalers' journals refer to 'Green Island' as a source of water; it is possible this is West Lewis Island (Paterson et al. 2019a). The logbooks do not refer to any interactions with Yaburara people, other than the rare vignette provided by Williams (see earlier).

The colonial vessel *Flying Foam* visited the islands on a return voyage from Camden Harbour in June 1864 (*Exploration of the north-west coast* 1864, 27 May). The crew of the *Flying Foam* found no water at Green Island in their search, although a flock of birds suggested water was present. Whales' bones were abundant: 'On the islands are hills of whale bones, these spots being apparently favoured resorts of that mammal and its captors' (*Exploration of the north-west coast* 1864, 10 June). It is not clear whether they are referring to whale carcasses that had been flensed on the beaches of Lewis and other islands; however, this seems possible given the preceding decades of whale harvesting. The *Flying Foam* also saw Yaburara people:

Establishing the Colonial Frontier

Gregory's 1861 expedition

The Swan River colonists became increasingly interested in expanding settlement in the North West from the 1840s. An exploratory mission to the North West led by Francis Gregory was supported through funds from the colony and the imperial government. The mission departed Fremantle in the *Dolphin* in April 1861, arriving 10 May in Nickol Bay. Gregory explored the region from May until October 1861 and charted the north-west coast and hinterland from the Fortescue to the De Grey rivers (Figure 18.6). This opened 'two to three million acres' for grazing and 200,000 acres for agriculture, triggering the subsequent stream of settlers from 1863. Gregory was most confident that cotton production would flourish,

and this trip established another primary resource industry as well. While waiting for the land expedition to return, Captain Dixon and crew remained with the *Dolphin*, where they collected pearlshell; thus Gregory returned to Perth with a rich cargo of pearlshell and pearls valued at £500–600 (Gregory 1861: 4; Gregory 1884: 96). 'The limits of the bed are as yet undefined, but there is good reason to believe, from the position of it, that with proper apparatus ships could soon be loaded with shell' (Gregory journals cited in de la Rue 1979: 71).

Dixon and Dolphin islands were named after the captain and his ship. It appears they did not enter either the Searipple or Flying Foam passages in 1861, stating

they had 'reason to believe there was a safe passage between Legendre and Dolphin Islands, leading into Mermaid Straits, where there appears to be an excellent harbour at all seasons of the year' (Gregory 1861: 4).

The 1861 expedition's encounters with Yaburara people, and other groups throughout the Pilbara, are significant, being the last set of observations to occur before the arrival of settlers. Gregory's optimism extended to the colonisation given: 'my opinion [is] that these people will not prove particularly troublesome to the settlers, if properly and fairly treated. They are not too numerous, and appear to be willing to take employ under Europeans' (Gregory 1861: 4).

There were numerous encounters by the exploring party and by the crew of *Dolphin* in their six months in 1861 at Nickol Bay as they awaited the exploring party. Gregory was well aware of King's account from four decades earlier, recognising their physical appearance (no removal of front teeth, and no circumcision) as well as the small composite watercraft made of logs. Gregory stated that they were familiar with tobacco and biscuit and surmised from their 'fearlessness and confidence in the good faith of Europeans [that] ... this was not their first acquittance with vessels on the coast' (Gregory 1884: 56). If Gregory had been aware of American whalers' use of Murujuga, he would probably have made the connection between their presence and Yaburara people's familiarity with Europeans.

During their time at Nickol Bay, Mr P. Walcott, made natural history collections 'which will be forwarded to some of the most eminent botanists, to be described and classified' (Gregory 1861: 4) and the party's botanical and natural history collector, spent time collecting plant specimens as well as collecting Yaburara vocabulary and objects (Walcott 1863). Mr Walcott appeared to delineate

between Aboriginal people on the eastern side and western sides of Nickol Bay. The western group (presumably Yaburara) 'had been made useful in filling the ship's water and wood, for which service they had been rewarded by the suitable distribution of biscuit' (Gregory 1884: 73). There were several attempts by Yaburara people to hunt the horses, which led to warning shots being fired.

The expedition report provides other general insight into their encounters. In most instances Pilbara people actively avoided the explorers, often abandoning their belongings, which were then described by the party. In one abandoned camp near the Harding River, Gregory found a 'very singular head-dress' made of bound grass, with an upright set of sticks and fur (possibly hair string). While 'highly ornamental', it was dismissed as 'not the least service as an article of protection for the head, either from the sun or in war' (Gregory 1884: 80). Most encounters happened near water sources, where people were seen fishing with spinifex nets, or hunting birds using nets and vegetation screens. Men, women and children were all met in these encounters.

There is no account of Aboriginal people being killed in these encounters, and no suggestion of major resistance to the movement of the exploring party. On a few occasions attempts were made to access the explorers' camps, and once the camp was threatened by a set of grass fires. The explorers observed country that had been burned by Aboriginal people, and evidence of their campfires even if people were not seen.

The decades of encounter between Yaburara and visiting Europeans and Americans in ships may have provided them with some knowledge of outsiders, yet the arrival of the frontier in 1863 meant that life would never be the same for Aboriginal people of the Pilbara.

Settlers after 1863

The first permanent settlers arrived in the North West after 1863, after the passing of generous land regulations for colonisation north of the Murchison River. The islands and associated coasts of Dampier Archipelago were potentially considered Class A land, which included all land with two miles of the coast – which could be held on an annual lease. All other land was Class C, which could be held as pastoral leasehold up to 100,000 acres for up to eight years, on certain conditions and a generous period of three years rent free. The initial settlers were from the Swan River Colony and from Victoria, and most arrived with their stock by boat. Walter Padbury and party (including a government surveyor and five Aboriginal people, four of whom were prisoners from

Rottnest Island) eventually landed at the mouth of the Harding River, a location initially known as Tien Tsin harbour. They had deemed Nickol Bay as unsuitable for landing stock, and as a result Murujuga was not the initial epicentre for colonisation. Butcher's Inlet was located during the landing of stock and provisions – this would soon become the site of Cossack. Padbury founded the first sheep station in the North West and others subsequently established stations inland from Cossack. The settlement on the Harding River that grew around John Withnell's Mt Welcome Station became Roebourne. Pastoralism would directly impact Murujuga with the establishment of a sheep station on West Lewis Island in the 1870s (Chapter 11).

Pearlshell fisheries

Many settlers became involved in the pearlshell fisheries, which started slowly. By 1866 settlers were targeting shell beds accessible from the beach at low tide ('dry shelling') and using small boats at places like Nickol Bay and along the coast near the De Grey River. In 1868 Alexander McRae wrote to his sister that 'Pearl fishing is going ahead, there are swarms of small boats on the coast now' (Letter from A. McRae, 24/2/1868, McRae Family Papers, SLWA AN396A/25). Thereafter the industry grew quickly, and dry shelling was replaced by boat-based pearling crews.

Murujuga was located in the centre of the pearling fisheries. As Alex McRae explained to his sister in 1874, 'when I speak of the Pearl Banks I refer to about 80 miles of coast line on each side of Nichol [sic] Bay' (cited in de la Rue 1979: 77). Aboriginal labour was essential, and men, women and children were involved in the earliest years.

The *Industry* belonging to Mr. Jas. Tuckey, left Fremantle on the 30th March, 1868, reached Tien Tsin [Cossack] about April 12th, started then for Lewis Island, and took two natives to go pearl-fishing. Got half a ton of shells round Lewis Island.

Somewhere on this voyage in the North West they also collected other items, for they returned to Fremantle 'bringing 5 tons pearl shells, 50 or 60 lbs. tortoise shells, and five or six cases curiosities' (Shipping Intelligence, *Inquirer and Commercial News*, 24 February 1869: 2).

An early documented use by pearlshellers of non-local Aboriginal workers in the islands can be found in depositions in Colonial Secretary's Office (CSO) files detailing the murder of a Beagle Bay man – Cooramarra – by Edward (Ned) Chapman on Lewis Island in June 1877, when Chapman allegedly beat the Aboriginal man to death (CSO vol. 877: 64 [5/3823? 1492]; Sholl to Col. Sec., 17 August 1877, CSO 877/57, cited in Forrest 1996: 52). Chapman was a pearler who two years earlier had been fined for conveying Aboriginal women on board a pearling vessel (*Inquirer and Commercial News*, 22 June 1875) and was cautioned for kidnapping Aboriginal people from the Beagle Bay area in 1877 (Forrest 1996: 52). Despite the official caution, it is noteworthy that

We have started getting Trepang here now and it will be a good thing for the place if it will bring a good price ... We have lots of it here but we have no experienced men ... so we do not know whether it is the right description or not until we hear from Singapore where we have sent our samples to be tested. (F. McRae to his father, 13 March 1877, cited in de la Rue 1979: 82)

We don't know exactly where McRae's trepang was from; however trepang is listed as an export from 1888 to 1903 (de la Rue 1979: 82).

The investigation into the death of Cooramarra was held in August 1877 in Roebourne by the Government Resident, Mr Robert Sholl, with the help of an interpreter

With the establishment of the pearling fisheries, unfettered access to the archipelago by the Yaburara was abruptly curtailed.

While relationships between coastal Aboriginal people and the settlers deteriorated and the frontier became increasingly violent, the need for Aboriginal labourers on the pearling fleet remained. Increasing numbers of indentured island South-east Asian workers, termed 'Malays', were also essential to the industry – at least until after the mid-1870s when the number of Malay divers reported to officials was greatly diminished due to cost, perceived ability, and government concern about in the treatment of divers (de la Rue 1979: 78).

An account of the voyage of *The Industry* in 1868 describes pearlshell diving around the West and East Lewis islands:

this account details several Aboriginal men from Beagle Bay on the island – Combordo (alias Froggy), Pollini, loorangoora (alias Charley), Ned and Chalgaboora (alias Macky) – who all stated that they had gone to the island with Chapman, his wife and several other white men to gather beche-de-mer (trepang). While they may have confused trepang harvesting with pearlshell, it is possible that they were speculating with trepang processing – an industry established in the northern Kimberley and across northern Australia and prosecuted at that time mainly by Asian fleets largely from Sulawesi (Macknight 1976). Two schooners from Sydney were described gathering trepang in Nickol Bay in 1868 (*Perth Gazette and West Australian Times*, 11 September 1868: 2). These schooners may have been the *Coquette* and the *Kate Kearney* (*South Australian Advertiser*, 29 September 1868: 2). In further evidence that local entrepreneurs were exploring trepanging in the Pilbara, Farquhar McRae wrote:

named 'Dub a Dub'. The Aboriginal men claimed that Chapman struck Cooramarra with a large stick when he refused to collect firewood and that he later died. A white man named McDowell and other white men stated that Cooramarra had been ill a long time, and that another man named Sustenance had left seven

Kimberley men behind: they said that Chapman had never been seen to mistreat Aboriginal workers (CSO vol. 877: 64). Furthermore, they said that at the time of the event Chapman was not on Lewis Island, rather at the Flying Foam Passage. Unsurprisingly, Chapman was not convicted. A report from E. H. Laurence (Acting Government Resident) at the Government Resident's Office in Roebourne to the Colonial Secretary (29 August 1877) dismissed the charges as being 'of a trifling character', despite acknowledging that Chapman had struck Cooramarra. Chapman was, however, fined two pounds for striking another Aboriginal man, Chalgaboora, on the back of the head with a stick. Laurence stated

that Chapman had obtained Aboriginal workers from the man named Sustenance and was thus found in breach of the *Pearl Shell Fisheries Act* and was convicted and fined 10 shillings (CSO vol. 877 [5/11751 No. 2310]: 100–102).

These events suggest Aboriginal men (in the 1877 account) were at Lewis Island and Flying Foam Passage with Mr and Mrs Chapman and others, and their presence was related to the pearlshell industry. It is not clear whether the events in 1877 occurred after the establishment of buildings at the site; however, finding the name Sustenance on Building 1 (see Chapter 11) suggests that this is likely.

The 1868 Flying Foam Massacre

Historical background

The Flying Foam Massacre of Yaburara people has been detailed previously (Gara 1983, 1993; Green 1998; Paterson and Gregory 2013 vol. 1; Gregory and Paterson 2015; McKenna 2016). The Flying Foam Passage between Dolphin Island (to the east) and Angel and Gidley islands (to its west) is bounded to the south by Mermaid Strait (or Mermaid Sound) and to the north by Collier Rocks and Legendre Island. Colonial-era references to the Flying Foam (or just the 'Foam') refer to this passage and nearby waters where pearlshelling occurred. Dolphin Island is separated from the Burrup Peninsula by Searipple Passage, also navigable by small craft (except at low tide), allowing access into Nickol Bay.

Following the 1863 arrival of settlers in the North West, the pearlshell fishery quickly grew. Robert Sholl, Government Magistrate in Roebourne from 1865 to 1881, reported the rise of the pearlshell industry (Figure 18.6), which relied heavily on a mix of 'voluntary and forced

labour' and used Aboriginal women, men and children as divers (Wright and Stella 2003: 1). Colonist Alexander McRae described 'swarms' of pearling boats at Murujuga by 1868, with more than 300 Aboriginal workers (McKenna 2016: 126–7, citing McRae from Wright and Stella 2003). As mentioned, the Aboriginal workers were mainly coastal people and would have included Yaburara and Mardudunhera people from Murujuga. Others were brought hundreds of kilometres to work, alongside Malay indentured labourers from the Dutch East Indies (Paterson and Veth 2020). Aboriginal workers were often forced to sign onto contracts overseen by the *Master and Servant Act*, which meant they faced penalties if they left their work on pearling boats and colonial settlements. The colonial gaol in Roebourne housed many prisoners, while others were sent to Rottneest Island. On the pearling fleet, violence was common and disregard for the Aboriginal people prevalent.

The massacre and its aftermath

The Yaburara responded to the increasing intrusions by pearlshellers by stealing food and other goods from their camps and from boats offshore. In late January 1868, some Aboriginal people stole a quantity of flour from a pearling boat anchored in Nickol Bay. Arrest of one of the perpetrators for this minor theft led to the death of his arresting party: a policeman, his Aboriginal assistant and two white pearlshellers. This in turn led to what has become known as the Flying Foam Massacre.

Rumours about this massacre, not a single incident

but rather, a series of shootings over three or four days at King Bay and around Flying Foam Passage, first became public in the 1880s. It has been referred to in historical studies and other published sources since that time. The official account of the incident, by the Government Resident Robert Sholl in Roebourne and the special constables he dispatched to apprehend the alleged murderers, indicate that perhaps five to 10 Aboriginal people at most were killed. Other historical and oral sources suggest that the death toll was much higher.

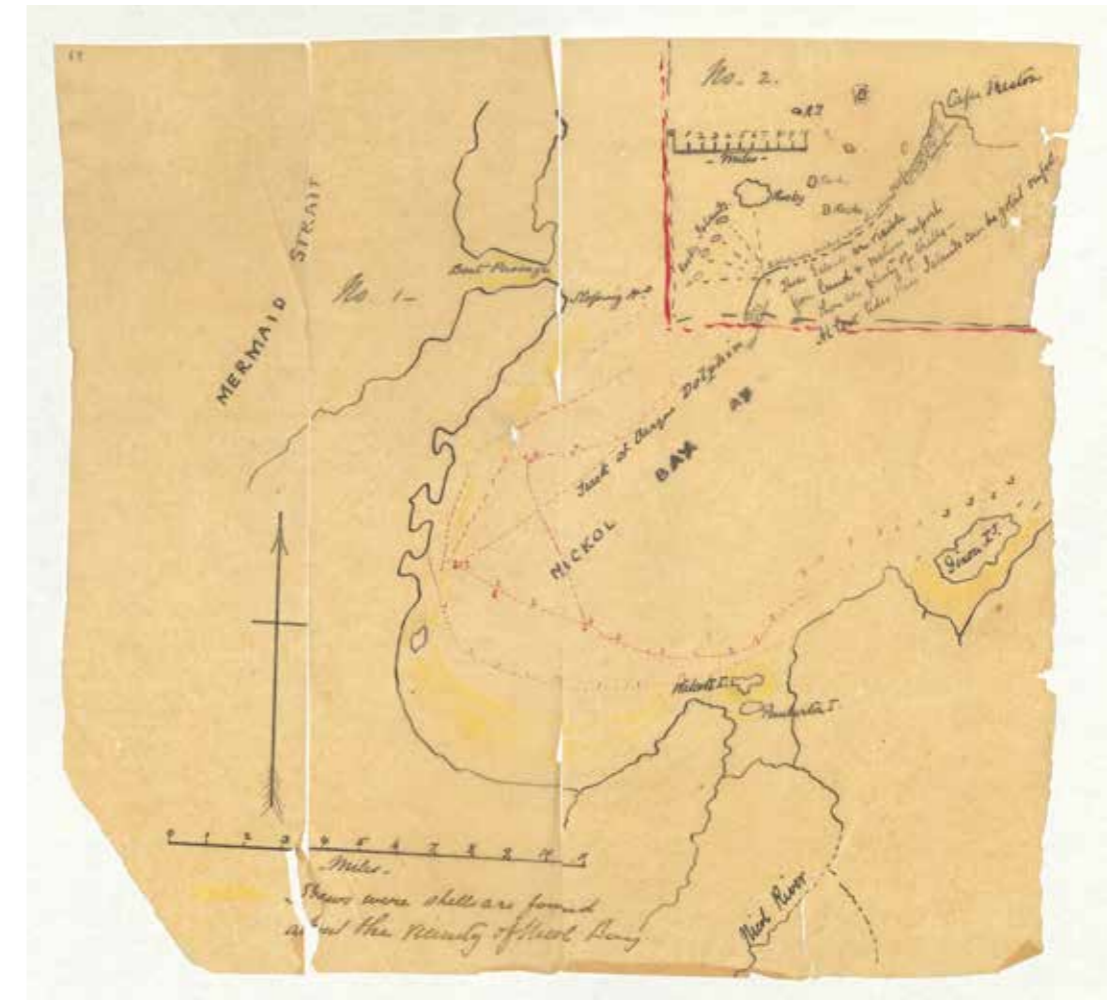


Figure 18.6. Hand-drawn map by Robert Sholl which 'shows where shells are found [about?] the vicinity of Nicol Bay', 1868 (SROWA, Cons. 36, item 624, folio 67).

The official account states that the policeman William Griffis and his Aboriginal assistant Peter, 'a Swan River native', arrested an Aboriginal man named Coolyerberri (alias Entire) at Nickol Bay in early February.¹ He was alleged to have stolen some flour from the *Pearl*, anchored in Nickol Bay. They camped on the night of 7 February near the coast a few kilometres west of the mouth of the Nickol River. During the night, Coolyerberri, who had been chained by his neck to a tree, was freed by other Aboriginal men who speared and clubbed to death Griffis, Peter and a pearler, Jermyn, who was camped nearby. The body of another pearler, Breem, a companion of Jermyn's, was never found. He may have escaped the attack but subsequently perished trying to reach Roebourne. The next morning Henry Davis, captain of the pearler *Lone Star*, was informed of the killings by two 14-year-old Aboriginal boys, Johnny and Jacky, who had swum out to his boat anchored in the

bay. Davis visited the murder scene and confirmed the three men were dead. He immediately sailed for Tien Tsin and reported the murders to the Government Resident, Robert Sholl.

Sholl visited the murder scene with his son, Robert Frederick Sholl, and some other Roebourne residents on 8 February to recover the bodies of Griffis and Peter. The body of Jermyn was too decomposed to return to Roebourne and was buried temporarily on the spot. Some Aboriginal people at the scene told Sholl that they had tried to dissuade the others from killing the policeman. From the tracks left in the sand, Sholl estimated that more than 100 Aboriginal people had been present at the time of the murders (CSO 3679/1886, Sholl to Colonial Secretary, 18 February 1868). Johnny (Euralgarri), one of the two boys who had swum out to the *Lone Star*, made a statement to Sholl naming the principal murderers, among them several 'island natives', presumably

¹ The Government Resident's reports relating to this incident, the reports of the special constables and other related correspondence were collected into a single file (CSO 3679/1886) in 1886, at the time of 'the Gribble Affair'. Most of these reports were also reprinted in full in the *Inquirer and Commercial News*, 3 April 1868: 3.

Yaburara men: 'Poodegin alias Charley, Woolgolgarry alias Ned, Mullagaugh, an island native, Minulgajebba, an island native, Parrakarrapoogoo, an island native, Cooracoora ... and Chilwell'. Three additional Aboriginal men were later named as being involved in the murders: 'Pulthalgerri alias Big Monkey, Euculgurria alias Jimmy, a

lad who took spears with him, Warrara, an island native' (CSO 3679/1886, Statement of Johnny, 8 February 1868). Griffis' murder had left the Roebourne district without a policeman.² In his report to the Colonial Secretary advising him of the murder of Griffis and his companions, Sholl paid tribute to the dead policeman:

P. C. Griffis' loss will be much felt in this district. He was bold and fearless in the discharge of his duty, and was much dreaded by native offenders. He died while executing the law upon those who would, if not apprehended and punished, most probably have been more severely dealt with by those whom they had robbed, and possibly in that case the innocent would have suffered with the guilty. (Sholl to Colonial Secretary, 18 February 1868)

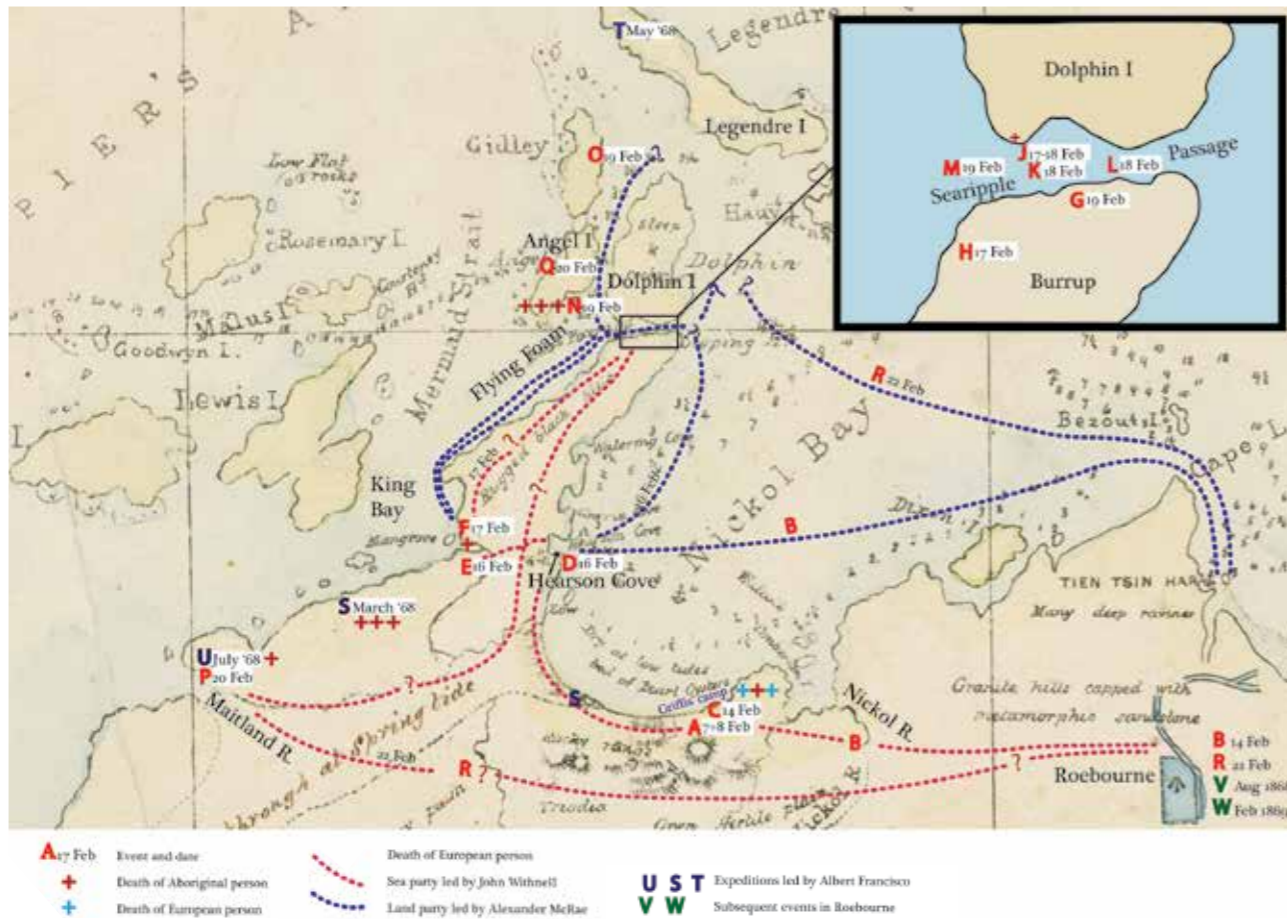


Figure 18.7. Map showing key events of the Flying Foam Massacre, 1868. Letters note various events in the historical sources in February (red) and later (blue and green). Reported killings detailed in these sources are shown by a cross; however, these minimum numbers do not reflect actual deaths, which were likely higher.

On his return to Roebourne, Sholl swore in two parties of special constables from among the local settlers, one to go by boat and the other on horseback, to apprehend the alleged murderers, who were said to have fled to the islands around Flying Foam Passage. Alex McRae and John Withnell volunteered to lead the overland party and the boat party respectively, and they were requested

to select the members of their own parties. Sholl laid down a clear chain of command for the operation; the volunteers sworn in as special constables were required to obey the orders of the two leaders, and should the two parties combine forces, McRae was to take overall command. Recognising the military-like nature of the operation, the *Herald* described Sholl's detailed instruc-

² William Griffis was from Bedford, USA, and evidently deserted his whaleship, *Parachute*, in Albany in 1864 (*Perth Gazette and West Australian Times*, 26 June 1868: 1). It is unlikely that he had any experience or training as a policeman prior to taking up the position at Roebourne in 1886.

tions as being 'not unworthy [of] the pen of the Duke of Wellington, in their precision and distinctness' (*Herald*, 4 April 1868: 3).

Sholl provided McRae with warrants for the arrest of the principal murderers, along with written instructions for his guidance:

As we have at present no police in the district and as the despatch of one or two men in that capacity would clearly be useless and lead to loss of life, it becomes necessary to enforce the law by means of a strong and well organized party.

... you will bear in mind the necessity of protecting your own party from injury and of dispersing [armed] bands whose attitude may show an intention of opposing the execution of the Law. I shall be prepared to assist you by every means in my power with horses, arms, and provisions, and will also spare you such men as may be useful and are at my disposal. I earnestly trust that the effect of your operations will be to teach these misguided persons to abstain from violence, and to protect the lives and property of the few white people who are scattered over a large extent of country, and who are peculiarly liable to attack. (CSO 3679/1886, Sholl to McRae, 11 February 1868)

Withnell was provided with different instructions; he was to assist the land party should the alleged murderers escape, or attempt to escape, to the islands of the archipelago. Sholl informed him it was his:

duty to disperse any armed bands who may be disposed to resist the execution of the Law, being careful that the women and children shall, as far as possible, be saved from harm. So soon as the objects of your expedition – viz. the arrest of the murderers and the dispersion of armed men – shall be accomplished, you will be good enough to order the return of the vessel. I shall not attempt to fetter your movements by giving special instructions, relying fully upon your discretion and judgment. Of course I shall be most happy to assist you by every means in my power. I sincerely trust that you will be enabled to take such measures as will tend to deter the natives from the commission of crimes so heinous as those which have lately occurred, and thus renew that feeling of security which has hitherto prevailed. (CSO 3679/1886, Sholl to Withnell, 11 February 1868)

The aims of the operation were clear: to arrest the alleged murderers and to 'disperse' any armed Aboriginal groups they encountered. The term 'dispersal' was a widely used euphemism across colonial Australia for removing Aboriginal people from Country, by shooting them if necessary. Sholl also gave McRae and Withnell a more subtle message; they were to teach the 'misguided persons to abstain from violence', to 'deter the natives' from committing such 'heinous' crimes again, and to ensure the safety of white settlers from further attacks. It may have been an oversight on Sholl's part that Withnell was specifically instructed not to injure any women or children, but McRae did not receive that direction.

McRae's party consisted of William Shakespeare Hall, A. E. Anderson, Farquhar McRae (Alex's brother), Robert Frederick Sholl, S. H. Meares and R. Bax. They were joined by two Aboriginal assistants, one named 'Tommy' (CSO 3679/1886, McRae to Sholl, 25 February 1868). Withnell's party in the cutter *Albert* consisted of G. B. Fauntleroy, R. Rowland, G. Howlett, G. Seubert, J.

Field, J. McKenzie, J. Glover, Fitzgerald and 'the Swan River native Monkey' (CSO 3679/1886, Withnell to Sholl, 25 February 1868).

Rumours had reached Roebourne that the Aboriginal people, emboldened by their killing of the policeman, planned to attack Roebourne and kill all the settlers there. The few remaining men in the town armed themselves, and some patrolled the streets at night to protect their families (*West Australian*, 9 November 1892: 3; Durlacher 2013 [1903]: 74-5).

McRae's men rode to Hearson Cove on 16 February where they found some Aboriginal tracks leading westwards across the peninsula. The boat party arrived there, too, and they arranged to meet the following day 'in Mermaid Strait, opposite the Rosemary Islands'. McRae's men then followed the tracks westwards and camped for the night at a waterhole near the south shore of King Bay. Aboriginal fires were visible on the beach about 400 m away. In the morning McRae and his men approached the Aboriginal camp around dawn:

On the 17th started on foot before daylight to try and surround the native camp seen last night, as by the number of tracks it was supposed to be a large one and likely to contain most of the men we wanted. They were camped on a clear sandy beach a few yards from the mangroves, but before we could get within reach of them they saw us and made for the mangroves, and the hills at the back of their camp; we cut some of them off but they would not stop to be arrested, so we had no alternative but to fire upon them, when one of the murderers 'Chilwell' was shot dead and several

others wounded. I regretted much to have to take this step with these misguided creatures, but we had no alternative, for if they cannot be arrested their escape without a lesson would only lead to further outrages. We found many articles taken from the murdered men. A crimean shirt and hat belonging to Griffis, also Peter's cap, together with a quantity of pannicans, dishes, pots, knives, shot, and many other articles. Mr. Withnell and some of his party who had landed near Dolphin Island joined us. They succeeded in taking a lad about ten years of age on the way over, and learned from him that several of the murderers were in the camp we tried to surround, and some others on the islands further to the north. He was put on board the Cutter but I believe afterwards absconded with a ship's water-bottle. After several hours spent in a fruitless scramble over the high rocky hills and led on by occasionally getting sight of some of the scattered natives, who as quickly disappeared among the rocks, we returned to camp. (CSO 3679/1886, McRae to Sholl, 25 February 1868)

It is remarkable that when McRae's party – seven or more armed men – opened fire on a group of fleeing Aboriginal men, women and children, only one man, Chilwell, was killed, and he happened to be one of the alleged murderers. Withnell's report states:

17th – Landed on the south side of the Boat Passage [Searipple Passage] where we met the land party as agreed. They informed us of a skirmish they had had the same morning with a number of natives: a boy was taken whilst crossing the Island, from whom we learned that several of the murderers were in the camp surprised in the morning, and more had gone to the north. (CSO 3679/1886, Withnell to Sholl, 25 February 1868)

McRae indicated that Withnell's men and the cutter joined him at King Bay, but Withnell's report suggests that McRae's men were at the Boat Passage when the boat party landed there, some hours after McRae's 'skirmish' that morning, and that it was McRae's party who had captured the boy while they were 'crossing the island'. It is interesting that Withnell does not mention visiting the site of the 'skirmish', although McRae's

two natives came to us, mistaking us for pearl-fishers, finding out their mistake only when it was too late to run away. They asked if the white-fellows were angry at the death of Griffis, the murder of whom they confessed to be implicated in, one of them was Mulligang [Mullagaugh], for whose arrest a warrant is out. We took them on board the cutter and kept a watch over them all night, but having no chains or handcuffs could not fasten them securely.

Neglecting to bring chains or handcuffs appears a significant omission on Withnell's part, bearing in mind that his principal objective was the arrest of the alleged

18th – Today the two prisoners managed to slip over the side and swim some distance before they were seen, we called to them to stop which they took no notice of, so I gave orders to fire upon them, as the mangroves were a short distance off, and had we attempted to re-take them, they would probably have escaped. Visited another island in the evening but saw no natives. (Withnell to Sholl, 25 February 1868)

Certainly Mullagaugh avoided being shot in the water – he was arrested several months later – but the fate of his companion is unknown. Withnell did not account for what he was doing during the rest of that day, after the prisoners escaped and before they visited 'another island' in the evening. According to McRae's

On the 18th some of our party was left in camp to communicate with the 'Cutter' the rest going out to the East, when we found that the natives had crossed the strait to Dolphin Island, six of them having just reached the opposite shore as we got down. Returned to camp and found that the cutter had

report indicates he was there. These and other discrepancies may be due to McRae and Withnell's unfamiliarity with the geography and placenames of the archipelago, but they may hint at some sort of cover-up.

On the afternoon of 17 February, Withnell crossed the Boat Passage and landed on the south shore of Dolphin Island, seeking water:

murderers. These two men escaped by the following morning:

report, Withnell came ashore at McRae's camp, evidently near the Boat Passage, and told him of the escape of the two prisoners and also made arrangements to land McRae's men on Dolphin Island the following day.

By that time McRae's men were evidently camped at the north-western end of Murujuga. McRae wrote:

arrived. Mr. Withnell shortly after came on shore and in-formed us that he had caught two natives on one of the Islands, one of whom there was a warrant against, but they both managed to get loose, and jump overboard the same evening. We shifted our camp a few miles to the East, when we were to meet the boat and be landed on Dolphin Island.

On 19 February, the cutter took McRae's men across to Dolphin Island:

On the 19th met the boat and were landed on the Island, but found the natives had crossed to some of the islands in Flying Foam harbor, so we were again taken on board the Cutter, when some of the natives were seen crossing the Bay in canoes and chase was given in a small boat, but we could not come up with them, so the party was ordered to fire upon them as they were close to the Island, one was shot and the other got on to the island where many others were seen standing on the shore, but as they made for the mangroves upon our landing we found it impossible to arrest any of them although several were shot or wounded. Returned to our camp in the evening. (CSO 3679/1886, McRae to Sholl, 25 February 1868)

They evidently shot dead one man in the water and 'several' were 'shot or wounded' on an island near Flying Foam Harbour. Withnell reported on the activities of the boat party on that day:

19th – This morning the land party were conveyed across to Dolphin Island, after which I landed with the party on an Island to the north of Flying Foam Harbor, but saw no natives; signal fires were seen on an adjacent Island. The land party saw some on one of the Islands in the Harbor, but did not succeed in taking any. (CSO 3679/1886, Withnell to Sholl, 25 February 1868)

The reports of McRae and Withnell are generally hazy in relation to the movements of both parties, but they are particularly vague at this time. It may be that the special constables were roaming the peninsula and nearby islands, firing at anybody they saw in the water or on the land. Bay for their horses, and proceeded to the Maitland River, where they believed some Aboriginal people had fled. They were unsuccessful in their search and returned to Roebourne on the 22nd. Withnell reported on the 20th a 'sharp skirmish' with some Aboriginal people on one of the islands near Flying

On 20 February McRae and his men returned to King Foam Passage, probably Angel or Gidley Island:

Landed upon the Island where the fires were noticed yesterday, and came upon a native camp in a very rugged piece of country, and as the natives were armed we had a sharp skirmish with them; I myself narrowly escaped being speared as did several others of the party. None of them were taken but several articles belonging to the murdered party were found in their possession in the camp. (Withnell to Sholl, 25 February 1868)

Withnell did not state whether any Aboriginal people were killed or wounded in this incident. On 21 February Withnell and his men returned to Roebourne on the *Albert*. and white witnesses, was published in the Perth newspapers in early April. It included Sholl's letter to the Colonial Secretary written after he had read McRae's

Upon their return both parties were officially thanked for their services by the Government Resident. Sholl's official report, which included those by McRae and Withnell as well as statements made by the Aboriginal and Withnell's reports. He acknowledged that they had not succeeded in capturing any of the alleged murderers and he also expressed his regret at the loss of Aboriginal lives:

From Mr. McRae's report, herewith forwarded, it will be seen that the principal murderers have not been secured, and that the prisoners captured made their escape. In fact, it was difficult to get at the men at all, and it became necessary to fire upon those who retreated into the mangroves. If this had not been done, the natives would have been able to attack the party, under the cover of the mangroves. A few – I do not know how many – were killed and some wounded.

Much as I regret that loss of life should have ensued, yet I cannot forget that but for the terror thus created among the natives, it would have been, if not impossible, very hazardous to attempt arresting the murderers with the ordinary police. I shall now send out the policeman with white and black assistants, and do not now apprehend that they will have to encounter resistance in the execution of their duty.

... I have tendered to Messrs. Withnell, McRae; and the gentlemen associated with them, my thanks for the services they have rendered, and I have no hesitation in saying that by their action, loss of life among the isolated whites has been prevented, the well-disposed natives confirmed in their amity towards us, the wavering made steadfast, the guilty terrified, and the old feeling of security revived among the whole white population. (CSO 3679/1886, Sholl to Colonial Secretary, 26 February 1868)

The Aboriginal death toll, according to McRae's and Withnell's accounts, was about four or five people:

- One man killed and several wounded by McRae's party at King Bay on 17 February.
- One man shot in the water by McRae's party at Flying Foam Harbour on 19 February.
- Several people 'shot or wounded' on a nearby island by McRae's party at Flying Foam Harbour on 19 February.

The fate of the alleged murderers

A resident of the town, Albert Francisco, volunteered to fill the role of policeman, and his offer was accepted by Sholl. It is unlikely that Francisco, like his predecessor, had any training as a policeman or any knowledge of proper police procedures. The new constable's principal role, it seems, was to apprehend the remaining Aboriginal men who had been identified as the murderers of Griffis and his companions.

[Francisco's] party crawled through the mangroves and came upon a plain 300 yards wide which lay between them and the natives. Monkey was detached and sent around the hill coming upon the natives in the rear. He called upon them to stop but they took flight upon which he fired and hit 'Ned' who before his death confessed that he had killed Griffis by spearing him in the left breast. He said that 'Entire' killed Breem. He denied any knowledge of Jermyn's fate. Two natives were killed in the water, against one of whom – Parrakarrapogoo – a warrant was issued for assisting in the murder. The party then returned to Roebourne. (CSO 3679/1886, Sholl to Colonial Secretary, 7 May 1868)

No reason was given for the shooting of the two men in the water and it was a stroke of luck that one of them turned out to be another of the alleged murderers. The other man was probably just an innocent bystander. It was also lucky that before he died, Ned had time to confess to his role in the death of Griffis, and to identify Entire as Breem's murderer. Francisco evidently arrested another man, Bowera aka Dickie, at that camp; he was later convicted for robbing Jermyn's tent at the time of Griffis' death. He was sentenced to three years gaol with

They closed in upon a party of six black adult natives. They attempted to run but upon being called to stand, five of the six surrendered, the other escaping towards the sea. As he was jumping into the water he was hit by a ball from a carbine and the natives report that he afterwards died from the effects of the wound. His name was Pordegina alias Charley, the native accused of having killed Peter. (CSO 3679/1886, Sholl to Colonial Secretary, 6 June 1868)

The five men arrested were Ewanbiddy (aka Castor Oil), Mullagaugh, Weenjou (aka Cowra Cowra), Warrara and Nemeru. The first three men were subsequently committed for trial to the Supreme Court in Perth for the murder of Griffis. Warrara was sentenced in Roebourne

In addition, an unknown number of Aboriginal people may have been killed during Withnell's 'sharp skirmish' on an island near Flying Foam Passage on 20 February. Sholl, apparently referring to the incident at King Bay on 17 February, claimed that he did not know how many people were killed there but thought it was 'a few'. McRae had reported that only one man was killed there, but Sholl may have known otherwise as one of his sons, Robert (Jr), was a member of McRae's party.

In March, having learned that Ned aka Woolgolgarry was in the Nickol Bay area, Police Constable Francisco, accompanied by Robert Sholl (Jr) and the two Swan River men, Woobat and Monkey, followed his tracks westwards from Nickol Bay. They found the wanted man in an Aboriginal camp near the coast, about 12 miles from Hearson Cove (perhaps at the southern end of Murujuga):

hard labour at Rottnest Prison (*Inquirer and Commercial News*, 3 June 1868: 3). He died there on 13 August 1870 (Green and Moon 1997: 122).

In May, Sholl received news that Entire was believed to be on Legendre Island. Francisco travelled by boat to Dolphin Island where he enlisted the aid of several pearl-ers, including John Watson, to assist him in the capture. Francisco and his companions then landed on Legendre Island, where they located an Aboriginal camp. According to Sholl:

to three years gaol at Rottnest for robbing Jermyn's tent, and Nemeru was acquitted on a similar charge. In the Supreme Court in August, Ewanbiddy, Mullagaugh and Weenjou were found guilty of murder and sentenced to death, but the sentences were later commuted to life

imprisonment (*Inquirer and Commercial News*, 15 August 1868: 3). Weenjou died in Rottnest Prison in 1874 and Ewanbiddy and Mullagaugh were released in August 1877 (Green and Moon 1997: 169–70, 238, 302).

Sholl received advice from a settler, Mr Venn, in June that Big Monkey and Entire (aka Coolyerberri, also

sometimes referred to as McIntyre), the man whose arrest precipitated the murder of Griffis, were on the Maitland River. In early July, Francisco proceeded to the Maitland with two Aboriginal assistants, Ben and Billy, and an Aboriginal guide, Moro, provided by Mr Venn. According to Sholl's later report to the Colonial Secretary:

At daybreak on the 6th they followed Entire's tracks towards the sea & seeing a smoke among some mangroves pushed on on foot till within about 50 yards of the camp when Francisco saw Entire sitting at a fire & called upon him to stop; he jumped up and made for a mangrove thicket in which Native Assistant Billy had been placed. Billy [?desired] him to stop & upon his disregarding the summons Francisco ordered Billy to fire which he did, shooting Entire through the body and killing him. (CSO 3679/1886, Sholl to Colonial Secretary, 29 July 1868; *Inquirer and Commercial News*, 2 September 1868: 3)

Sholl advised that Big Monkey, 'the last of the principal murderers now at large', was believed to be in the Sherlock River area and he hoped 'to get him soon'.

A month later, Moro, the Aboriginal man who had led Francisco to Coolyerberri's camp, was found strangled to death near Roebourne. Four Aboriginal men were

arrested and committed to trial in Perth for murder. Sholl advised the Colonial Secretary that the four men claimed they had murdered Moro not because he had betrayed Coolyerberri's whereabouts, but for another personal reason. Sholl felt he knew better and recommended that 'an example should be made':

As natives in our employ rendered material assistance to the police, and that assistance could be [?withdrawn] if they were liable to be murdered with impunity & the present strong reliance upon the power of the white people to protect them weakened, I think it peculiarly necessary that an example should be made. (CSO 1868/624: 13, Sholl to Colonial Secretary, 25 August 1868, 24 October 1868)

The four prisoners were sent down to Perth for the trial. The Attorney-General, however, considered that the evidence in this case was 'inferior' and was not supported by the confessions of the prisoners, which he regarded as 'informal'. The charges were dismissed and the prisoners returned to Roebourne (*Perth Gazette and West Australian Times*, 25 September 1868: 2).

In February 1869 Sholl reported to the Colonial

Secretary that Poodegin and Big Monkey had come into Roebourne, 'supposing that the affair had blown over'. Poodegin had previously been reported to have been shot dead on Legendre Island by Francisco in May 1868 but that report was incorrect; he had only been wounded in the thigh. Sholl recommended to the Colonial Secretary that no action be taken against the two men and he was in favour of an amnesty:

As the trial of these men would involve much expense, for the witnesses employed in the previous trial would have to be forwarded to Perth, as well as an interpreter (if one can be obtained), I have not arrested these men. As they do not anticipate evil I can take them at any time should His Excellency the Governor authorize their arrest. Personally I am in favour of an amnesty, for the natives have received a severe lesson and much blood has been spilt. (CSO 1869/646: 156, Sholl to Colonial Secretary, 27 February 1869)

Indeed, much blood had been spilt. Sholl may have been referring to the four Aboriginal men killed by Francisco and his Aboriginal assistants over the preceding few months – Woolgolgarry, Parrakarrapogoo and one

unnamed man in March, and Coolyerberri in July – and the murder of Moro in August. It is more likely he was referring to the unnamed people who were shot in February.

The Aboriginal death toll from the killings

Alex McRae, originally from western Victoria, wrote to his sister there a couple of days after he returned to

Roebourne from Murujuga. He wrote:

The natives have become rather troublesome of late. Hitherto they confined their depredations to stealing a little flour or an odd sheep but a few days ago they murdered a Police Constable and his assistant that had been sent out to arrest some of them for flour stealing, together with two men, the crew of a pearling boat with whom they were camped near the coast.

Two strong parties were organized to go out and give the natives 'fitz' – one by land and the other by sea to cooperate with the land party in a craft chartered by the Govt. for the purpose. I was in charge of the land lot, Farquhar [Alex's brother] and Anderson [a fellow Victorian] was out with me – a great many lost the number of their mess. (Letter from A. McRae, 24/2/1868, McRae Family Papers)

McRae's use of the term 'fitz' is unusual but its meaning is reasonably clear; he and his men terrorized the Aboriginal people, at least. In an earlier account of the Flying Foam Massacre Gara (1993: 17) transcribed the last word of McRae's quote above as 'men' but has since realised the word was in fact 'mess'. To 'lose the number of your mess' is an obsolete nautical term, meaning 'to die' or 'to be killed'. An example comes from New Zealand during the 'Maori Wars' of the 1860s: 'Had our men been drawn into [an ambush] at Pa Puni, two thirds of them would have lost the number of their mess' (*Tasmanian Times*, 27 September 1868: 3). While McRae in his official report acknowledged only the death of one man, he hinted to his sister that in fact many Aboriginal people had died.

The other reference contemporary to the massacre that has come to light is a letter written by W. Taylor, the owner of Cooya Pooya Station near Roebourne, to the Colonial Secretary early in January 1869. A week earlier,

This state of affairs has now lasted so long that it is in vain to look for any changes for the better during Mr Sholl's reign. The former policeman Griffiths met his death about a year ago in consequence of the excesses which he committed on the Blacks. I believe the immediate cause was the carrying off of two women to Roebourne. They collected and murdered him. Mr Sholl then [mustered] what whites he could and murdered the blacks, some members of the party committing the most diabolical acts both on innocent women and children. (CSO 646/89, Taylor to Colonial Secretary, 4 January 1869)

Taylor's claims that Griffis was killed in retaliation for his 'excesses' and that the punitive party had committed 'diabolical acts' were ignored, but the Attorney-General requested further details from Sholl as to what had happened when Francisco visited Taylor's station. The Attorney-General, apparently dissatisfied with Sholl's handling of the matter, subsequently recommended that Francisco be dismissed from the police (CSO 1869/646: 156, Sholl to Colonial Secretary, 25 February 1869; CSO 647/27: 156, Sholl to Colonial Secretary, 12 May 1869).

Francisco took up pearling and remained in the Roebourne area for some years (*Perth Gazette and West Australian Times*, 21 February 1873, Supp.: 1). He was

it is very well known by all old hands around Nickol Bay and the Flying Foam Passage that in one day there were quite sixty natives, men, women and children shot dead. The natives have shown me the skulls of 15 who were shot dead. Three of the skulls were those of children and two of these small skulls had bullet holes in them. (Gribble 1886: 45)

in late December 1868, Taylor had written to Sholl to report that PC Francisco had recently visited his station in Taylor's absence, accompanied by another white man, Shea, and an Aboriginal policeman. They had, according to Taylor, threatened his Aboriginal workers with guns, 'ravished' one of the women in a woolshed, shot and wounded the woman's husband, and abducted a girl and a boy, the former to be the Aboriginal policeman's wife, and the latter to work on Shea's pearling boat. Taylor pointed out that Sholl's son Horace had been with Francisco at that time but took no part in these 'atrocious outrages' (CSO 1868/646: 80, Taylor to Sholl, 25 December 1868). Francisco denied everything and he was backed up by Horace, so Robert Sholl took no action.

Taylor wrote directly to the Colonial Secretary on 4 January. He referred to the recent incident at Cooya Pooya and other injustices that had been committed upon Aboriginal people in the area and pointed out:

convicted in 1879 in Roebourne for illegally carrying Aboriginal women on his vessel and was fined five pounds (*WA Police Gazette*, no. 19, 7 May 1879: 79).³ Robert Shea was killed by Aboriginal people near the De Grey River in 1873, apparently in response to some 'indiscretions' he had committed with their women (*Perth Gazette and West Australian Times*, 9 May 1873: 3).

It was not until 1886 that allegations of a massacre were first made public by a missionary, Rev. John Gribble, in his book *Dark Deeds in a Sunny Land*. His book listed numerous atrocities which had allegedly been committed against Aboriginal people in the North West, including one reported to him by David Carley, a settler at Roebourne:

The controversy aroused by Carley's allegation died down the following year when Gribble left the state, after losing a libel case he had instituted against the *West Australian* (Hunt 1984).

One significant account of the events of the massacre appeared in 1933 when the *West Australian*

When the news of [Griffis'] murder was brought to the town the Resident Magistrate swore in a number of residents as special constables and despatched them in two parties, one a land party and the other a boat party, to avenge the death of the two murdered men. At daylight next morning the land party came upon a number of natives in camp, several of whom may or may not have been concerned with one or other of the murders. They were shot down while others took to the water only to be finished off by the boat party. I leave it to the imagination of my readers to picture the public indignation that would be aroused today by such slaughter, perpetrated as it was with the colourable approval of the responsible Government official of the district. The men really guilty of the murders of Bream [sic] and the constable were not in the camp where these reprisals were made. (Watson 1933)

In 1946 the *West Australian* published some reminiscences of Edward Angelo who, in 1892, was working as a government clerk in Roebourne when he joined some of his friends on an Easter cruise to the islands. Angelo later became a prominent businessman and mayor at

We also explored Gidley, Legendre and Angel Islands, and landed on a small unnamed islet about two miles south of Angel Island. Here we discovered numbers of skeletons. On inquiring later we were told that many years previously a white man had been murdered by natives at Port Walcott. The band had been chased in boats, found on this island and wiped out. Judging by the skeletons the punitive expedition had done its job thoroughly. (*West Australian*, 23 November 1946: 5)

It seems unlikely that Aboriginal people would have sought refuge on this island, now known as Conzinc Island, as it has no cover, but it is possible that some were trapped there and killed by the boat party in February 1868. It is also possible that the bodies of those killed elsewhere at that time were collected and later dumped on the island, to hide the evidence. The special constables certainly seem to have had sufficient time to accomplish such a task on the two days following the attack on the camp, when both McRae and Withnell's

Lot of Yaburara people there [the Burrup], long time ago. This policeman took a young girl into the bush, with a rifle. The old fella [the girl's husband] he got a spear in his hand, he put the spear right through the policeman's chest. The other police all got their guns, went out there, got all the Yaburara people up, got them all together, shot them down. Must be 30, 40 people killed. (cited in Gara 1983: 91)

Coppin Dale later gave Jan Turner (1990: 43) a detailed account of the shootings that appears to correspond closely with what is known of the movements of the special constables. He did not wish this information to be made public, however. Turner also heard stories about the massacre from other Roebourne Elders, since deceased, in the early 1980s.

Many of the older Aboriginal people with whom

published the reminiscences of a pearler, John Watson, who had assisted PC Francisco to arrest some of the alleged murderers on Legendre Island in May 1868. Watson's memory of the murders of Griffis and Breem is a little confused – not surprising perhaps after 65 years – but his account continued:

Carnarvon, and a member of the Legislative Assembly in Perth. In the *Balley Rat*, the party sailed from Nickol Bay to Dolphin Island and then around into Flying Foam Passage, where they made camp onshore. Over the next few days they explored Dolphin Island and others nearby:

reports are somewhat vague about their movements.

The massacre is spoken of in local Aboriginal oral histories. Coppin Dale, a Ngarluma man who lived for many years on Karratha Station, told Nic Green in 1983 that he had heard of the massacre in his youth from the few remaining Yaburara people left alive then. His account corroborates Taylor's claim that Griffis was killed for abducting and raping an Aboriginal woman. Coppin told Green that:

Gara talked during fieldwork in 1992 had heard of the massacre but did not know any details, or perhaps were reluctant to discuss the incident. David Connors, from Warambie Station, had heard the story when he was young and provided some interesting information. When Gara first asked him if he knew what had happened to the Yaburara people, he replied:

3 Francisco moved to South Australia in about 1880 and became a publican in Adelaide. He died there in 1917.

They all got shot. King Mullagong,⁴ that fella that showed the Withnell brothers Roebourne, he didn't like those people down there, he had something against them. He got the coppers there to go and shoot them. One of the coppers got speared too! (Gara 1993: 18)

Connors said that when he was living at Karratha Station as a young boy, an old Yaburara man named Maitland had told the Elders there the story of the massacre. Connors heard the story from the Elders when he was

No, they wiped the whole lot out, women and children too. Only one young fella left, he fell beside the old fellas and the blood all covered him and after they shot them all, they kicked the young fella in the ribs ... The young fella he was alive for quite a while – he killed a lot of policemen, police boys and all. He used to wait for them and he got hold of one of their rifles and learned about it. He ended up shooting them before they got there because they had to come across in a dinghy – they reckon he was really bloody deadly. (Gara 1993: 18)

Maitland had not been on the Burrup when the massacre occurred, but he had heard about it soon afterwards and went back to the peninsula, according to Connors, 'to see what damage had been done'. Maitland met the young survivor there and tried to convince him to come into Roebourne 'to apologize'. The young man refused, however, and declared his determination to stay there and to kill any whites who came looking for him. According to Connors, the police made several attempts to capture the young man and finally succeeded when they came overland across the peninsula and cornered him at either Watering Cove or Cowrie Cove. They killed him there after he had exhausted his supply of spears.

There is no confirmation of this episode in the historical sources. However, Francisco did make several forays out from Roebourne in the months after the massacre seeking the remaining alleged murderers and it is possible that something like the incidents described by Connors did occur. It is unlikely that the

Pioneer communities appeared to be unable to cope with the psychological tensions produced by even small amounts of inter-racial violence. The punitive expedition – official and unofficial – was the almost universal riposte. The objective was simple: the use of overwhelming force to crush resistance once and for all and drown in blood the Aboriginal determination to take an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. (Reynolds 1981: 63)

Some Yaburara survived the shootings, perhaps hiding in the rocky piles inland beyond the reach of the special constables on horses and in boats. Others may have sought refuge on the more distant islands of the archipelago. Some, like Maitland, may have been visiting relatives on the mainland at the time. However, irrespective of how many people died, the massacre effectively

older. Gara told him that the official reports of the incident suggested that only a few Aboriginal people had lost their lives. He replied:

young Yaburara man killed a white policeman, for this would not have gone unreported, but it is possible that he killed one or more Aboriginal police assistants before he himself was killed.

We will probably never know the real death toll of the Flying Foam Massacre. The special constables' reports suggest that only about five Aboriginal lives were lost. There are various hints in the historical and oral sources that many more people died; the Aboriginal people 'received a severe lesson and much blood' was spilt, 'a great many lost the number of their mess', the whites 'murdered the blacks' and 'committed the most diabolical acts both on innocent women and children', 'sixty natives, men, women and children shot dead' and 'they were shot down while others took to the water only to be finished off by the boat party'.

As Henry Reynolds observed in his book *The Other Side of the Frontier*:

meant the end of the Yaburara as a cohesive social unit. The indiscriminate slaughter of senior Elders, young men, women and children left the survivors fearful and scarred, both physically and psychologically. After the 'killing times' were over, the Yaburara, like other Aboriginal groups throughout Australia, had little choice but to acquiesce to the whites.

Smallpox and Measles in the Early Colonial Era in the North West

The extent of the impact on Indigenous people globally from diseases introduced as a form of culture contact with Europeans remains an important field of inquiry (Ramenofsky 1987). As many diseases moved among Aboriginal groups ahead of Europeans observing and recording their impact, there is debate about how many

Indigenous people perished. This has a direct impact on estimating the size of societies at the time of contact with outsiders. There has been little work on this topic for Western Australia's north-west regions. Here we focus on historical accounts related to the outbreaks of smallpox and measles in the Pilbara.

Smallpox epidemic 1865–70

Described as the 'most dreadful scourge of the human species', smallpox, which had killed millions of people since it first appeared about 3,000 years ago, was eradicated from the planet in 1979. It appears to have become endemic in Asia about 1,600 years ago and subsequently spread to Europe and Africa and, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, to South and North America (see, for example, Crosby 2004: 199–208; Fenner 1984). Smallpox was highly contagious and was usually transmitted via droplet infection from close contact with an infected person or through contact with infected clothing or bed linen. The first symptoms were fever and headache followed by a rash which developed in the mouth and on the tongue. The rash gradually spread over the face and the rest of the body and soon developed into sores and pustules, which within a week or two formed crusty scabs. When those scabs fell off, they left the circular pock-marks characteristic of the disease. There were several types of smallpox: variola major, which had a mortality rate of 30% or more; and two rarer forms, 'flat' or malignant smallpox and haemorrhagic smallpox, both of which were almost always fatal. There was also a variation, variola minor, which was less severe, with a mortality rate of about one per cent. The mortality rate for all forms of the disease was generally much higher for children, but in populations which had no previous exposure it killed young and old indiscriminately.

People who were lucky enough to survive one bout of smallpox were often badly scarred for life and sometimes left blind, but were subsequently immune to the disease. The process of 'variola' to provide immunity from smallpox was introduced into Europe in the early 1700s, but had been practised for several centuries before that in Asia and the Middle East. Variolation, also known then as 'inoculation', involved the insertion of powdered scab material or sometimes pus from an infected person underneath the skin of an uninfected person, giving the latter a mild localised infection and also life-long immunity. However, a

small proportion of those who received this treatment developed normal smallpox symptoms and died. In the 1790s Edward Jenner developed the technique of 'vaccination' using material extracted from the lesions of dairy maids infected with cowpox, which rapidly took over from the older variolation method.

Smallpox seems to have first spread to the Aboriginal people in the Sydney area in 1789, within a year of the arrival of the first European settlers. There were reports of numerous deaths amongst the local tribes and many additional deaths as the disease spread inland and along the coast. A more extensive outbreak in about 1829-30 is believed to have spread downstream along the Murray River, probably killing many thousands of Aboriginal people in New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia, and reaching as far to the west as the Yorke and Eyre peninsulas (Campbell 2002: 88-104, 119-35; Dowling 2021: 23-46).

The origin of the 1789 outbreak is a matter of debate. It has been suggested that it may have arrived via a foreign vessel visiting Sydney at that time, or it had spread from the northern coast of Australia after being introduced there by Indonesian fishermen (Campbell 2002: 96-7; Dowling 2021: 22-3). It has also been claimed that smallpox was deliberately introduced to the Aboriginal people in the Sydney area via blankets or clothing infected with smallpox scabs brought to the colony for use in variolations (Cumpston 1914: 1-3; Butlin 1983: 21-2), but there is little or no historical evidence to support such a claim. The origin of the 1829-30 epidemic is even more of a mystery.

The next significant outbreak of smallpox was in north-western Western Australia in 1865, again principally affecting Aboriginal people. Maitland Brown, while searching near Roebuck Bay in March 1865 for three missing white men, Harding, Panter and Goldwyer, encountered Aboriginal people who he believed had recently suffered from smallpox: 'From the pitted faces and bodies of many of the natives here, it is evident

4 Mullagong or Mullagough was a prominent Ngarluma man, well known to the early settlers at Cossack and Roebourne. He visited Perth in January 1866 in company with W. S. Hall, and wore a breastplate inscribed 'Harbour Master of Tien Tsin Bay'. The *Perth Gazette* (12 January 1866: 3) described him as 'the chief of the Tien Tsin tribe of Aborigines' and noted that it was 'to this man's influence with his fellows that the settlers owe their peaceful relations and freedom from hostile attacks'. He was not the same man as Mullagaugh, who was imprisoned for his part in the murder of Griffis.

that a disease resembling small-pox in its effects has lately been raging in this locality' (*Perth Gazette and West Australian Times*, 19 May 1865: 2). About this time, smallpox was present in the De Grey area, according to Pietro Ferrara, who worked on the first station established there:

[we] have still been troubled at the De Grey as a result of the smallpox, a great number of Natives are dead (as I have been told by the Aborigines themselves), most of us are still weak from fever, sore eyes etc. (cited in Smith 2020: 9)

Smallpox was endemic in South-east Asia then and was prevalent in the Indonesian archipelago during the second half of the nineteenth century. It was probably introduced to the north-west coast of Australia by tre-pang-fishers from Macassar or other Indonesian islands (Campbell 2002: 194; Macknight 2011: 137-8; Hunter and Carmody 2015: 123). Richmond Thatcher, who visited the Flying Foam pearling grounds in 1869, observed that it was well known that 'Malayan' fishing vessels had been visiting the Australian coast 'for many years' (Thatcher 1869, 23 October: 3). Smallpox may have been introduced to the coast on other occasions in previous centuries, but had never become endemic, probably due to environmental factors as well as the general sparseness of the Aboriginal population (Butlin 1983: 26, 32-3; Bennett 2009: 46) and the more limited contact made. Charles Harper, an early settler on the De Grey River, later reported to E. M. Curr that the disease:

came from the north, and passed over the De Grey River country; that large numbers of the Ngurla [Ngarla] died of it; that many survived its attack, and that a few Whites suffered from it lightly. Many of the Blacks who died were left unburied, and Mr. Harper saw camps long afterwards in which their bones lay bleaching on the ground. The tribe called the small-pox *boola*, a term applied to anything nasty or poisonous. (Curr 1886 Vol. 1: 290)

Smallpox was highly contagious and capable of more or less simultaneously infecting an entire local Aboriginal group, effectively incapacitating all its members and leaving no one to attend the sick or to obtain food, water or firewood. If there was no help available to them, the whole group may have died. Family members, terrified by the first onset of the new disease, may have fled, taking smallpox into neighbouring groups or dying along the way. In February 1866 Sholl reported the arrival in the Roebourne district of a disease believed to be smallpox:

The natives have been attacked with a disease, alleged to be small pox, and a number have died. The disease came from the eastward. There was a sick camp close to our own. The invalids were deserted by their comrades, and left to starve. I did what I could for the poor wretches, giving them such food as I could spare. One man died, and they merely covered the body with boughs. We buried the corpse, and the next morning they had all disappeared. Some bodies have been seen near the sea coast. (*Inquirer and Commercial News*, 21 March 1866: 2)

One of Robert Sholl's sons, Trevarton, had recorded the arrival of smallpox in the Roebourne area in his journal in late January:

A great number of the natives are very ill with this disease which has broken out amongst them. I think it is the 'small pox'. Timothy's father died this afternoon and was shortly after buried, several more are on the point of death. We make a bucket of gruel or burgoo twice a day for the poor wretches, they are howling fearfully tonight. I suppose lamenting the death of one of them. (Sholl, T. C. SLWA AN365: 27 January 1866)

A resident of Nickol Bay, writing to his family in Victoria, reported in February that 'small-pox is now raging amongst the natives, and many of them have died' (Baynton 1866). Emma Withnell, the wife of John Withnell, nursed the sick Aboriginal people:

the Aboriginal population succumbed by the hundred, an average of six per day for weeks being buried in the vicinity of the settlement, while for months afterwards bodies of natives were to be seen along the river banks. Mrs Withnell with the aid of her medicine chest saved a few of these unfortunates. (Battye 1912, Vol. 2: 180)

By April Sholl thought that the epidemic was not as severe as he had originally feared it might be. He reported: 'Happily the epidemic ... is not so virulent as at the date of my last letter. One death occurred near our camp, that of an old man. We had to bury him' (*Inquirer and Commercial News*, 16 May 1866: 2).

In November Sholl advised the Colonial Secretary that there was little or no sickness in the area at that time. He noted, however, that in about early July smallpox had spread to some of the white residents of the town:

the small pox, which had hitherto been confined to the aboriginal population, manifested itself among the white inhabitants. There were altogether seven cases, but the disease was of a very mild character, and the patients speedily recovered; only one adult was attacked. The disease has happily disappeared, but as it may be again brought among us, and it is advisable that all reasonable precaution should be taken, I have applied for a supply of vaccine lymph. (*Perth Gazette and West Australian Times*, 9 November 1866: 2)

It is evident that smallpox affected the Aboriginal people in the Roebourne area from the start of the year until July at least, when some of the white residents began to suffer symptoms. It was only then that Sholl applied for a supply of vaccine for the district. An early settler of the Nickol Bay area, Alexander Richardson, supplied some ethnographic data to Curr for the latter's 1886 book, *The Australian Race*. Richardson referred to the smallpox epidemic having 'committed considerable ravages' among the local people. Curr wrote:

This disease Mr. Richardson believes to have come from the tribes further east, and that it was probably introduced at Camden Harbour by the Malay proas which occasionally visit the west coast. He remarks that there can be no doubt of its having been genuine small-pox, often confluent, and that the Blacks, terrified at the horrible and unknown malady, fled from those amongst them stricken with it; that many of the deserted sufferers were supplied with food and drink by the Whites, none of whom, however, took the disease, except a few children who had not been vaccinated and had it in a mild form. Many Blacks are still living who display the marks commonly left by the disorder. (Curr 1886 Vol. 1: 296)

Richardson referred briefly to the 'deadly epidemic' of smallpox in his reminiscences, *Early Memories of the Great Nor'West*, first published in 1909. He believed it had occurred in about 1867, had been introduced by 'Malay' fishermen and had caused 'hundreds, if not thousands' of deaths among the Aboriginal people (Richardson 1909: 41). He provided more details in the second edition of his book, published five years later:

I believe it was the year 1866 that this outbreak occurred, and it certainly gave one a very realistic idea of what a smallpox outbreak is like where neither medical skill, nursing comforts and accessories – nor vaccination – was possible. When a poor native victim was attacked his companions knowing too well the highly infectious character of the disease, simply cleared away and left the poor victim to shift for himself, and, as often happened, to perish. I also remember having one or two cases of natives taking it to our camp, and the poor fellows seemed not only grateful for being cared for, fed and attended, but rather astonished also that anyone should act towards them so differently from their own people, the result being that they pulled through. (Richardson 1914: 64)

Smallpox seems to have disappeared in the Roebourne area by late 1866. However, it was present further south in the Geraldton area where, in 1868, John Perks, another informant of Curr's, was living:

They called the disease *Moolya errill-ya-rill-ya*; had no remedy for it but incantations, and no fear or knowledge of its infectiousness. Numbers of those attacked died, and were buried. Others were deserted in dismay by their friends before death, and their bones still bleach in the sun. Some found nurses in the Whites on the stations, none of whom contracted the disease. Of the individuals who survived, a moiety bear the marks of small-pox; their faces, in many cases, being fearfully pitted, scarred, and farrowed. To judge by the marks left, more men seem to have survived than women, and more women than children. Mr. Perks notices that he never saw White men so fearfully marked. He adds that on the occasion of this outbreak of small-pox, many of the Blacks were induced, and even compelled, by the colonial authorities, to present themselves to the medical officer stationed at Champion Bay, and were there vaccinated by him. (Curr 1886 Vol. 1: 369–370, 302; see also Campbell 2002: 202–208)

An anonymous informant of Curr (1886 Vol. 1: 302) advised him that many of the Aboriginal people between North-West Cape and the De Grey River were 'strongly marked with small-pox which they call *moonngano*, and say it reached them from the eastward'. Cumpston, in his 1914 study of smallpox in Australia,

documented an outbreak of smallpox in the Irwin River area, inland from Geraldton, in April 1869. The local policeman reported the deaths of 'large numbers' of the Aboriginal people there, including 17 people in one camp. Cumpston learned in interviews with old settlers and former officials that smallpox had affected Aboriginal people in the Carnarvon and Roebourne areas at about

This disease appears to have been entirely of native origin, but in the absence of any medical testimony as to its diagnosis, it is impossible to judge whether it is the same as the true small-pox as known to Europeans; if it is the climate would appear to have abated some of its fatal effects. (*Perth Gazette and West Australian Times*, 12 March 1869: 2)

The editorial may be alluding to an eruptive skin disease, apparently indigenous, known to settlers across Australia in the nineteenth century as the 'native pox'. This disease occasionally affected Europeans, especially children, sometimes severely (Cumpston 1914: 3-6). It, too, was sometimes mistaken for smallpox or chickenpox and also for 'scarlatina' (scarlet fever).

Sholl advised the Colonial Secretary in January 1870

In this case there will be great loss of life, and the stoppage of the fishery. The disease attacked natives and whites in this place in 1866, when many of the former died, but happily no white person. The disorder then travelled from East to West. (CSO 665/105, Sholl to Colonial Secretary, 27 January 1870)

Sholl's fears were justified. Thatcher reported the outbreak of smallpox amongst Aboriginal people in the Nickol Bay area a month later, and noted that it

A sort of pustularia has broken out to the Westward of Tien-Tsin among the aboriginals; this disease which is undoubtedly small pox, has carried off numbers; when the sores are confluent the attack is fatal unless great care is taken; it does not seem to attack the whites at all, this disease will seriously interfere with the introduction of westward natives on the eastern banks, as the natives of the latter place, if unable to kill the unfortunate sufferers, are sure to clear out in a body. The *Pilot* was out as far as the Ashburton but returned without any, as Mr. McLean declined taking any men from the infected district. (*Herald*, 5 February 1870: 3)

At about that time, smallpox had spread among the Aboriginal people at the Fortescue River, and some divers from the 'South Sea Islands' aboard the *Kate*

The small-pox had disappeared at the Fortescue, not, however, before it attacked Mr. Hooley's children in a mild form. Mr. Hooley, when he had an opportunity, bled the natives when first attacked, and those who were thus treated recovered. Others died. At the Maitland the disease was still prevalent, and several natives, some of them useful men, have died. Roebourne was free for the present, but it was feared it would travel in that direction, sooner or later. (*Inquirer and Commercial News*, 16 March 1870: 2)

Several of the historical sources relating to smallpox in the 1860s indicate that there was some doubt as to whether the disease affecting the North West was really smallpox. Maitland Brown, for example, referred to the disease he saw at Roebuck Bay in 1865 as 'resembling small-pox', and Sholl wrote that the 'disease alleged to be small pox' reached Roebourne in 1866. As noted, an editorial in the *Perth Gazette* in 1869 also cast doubt on

that time (Cumpston 1914: 65-6).

In March 1869 the *Perth Gazette* reported that there were several suspected cases of smallpox in Melbourne which medical authorities there had determined to be chickenpox, and the editorial suggested that the disease which had been affecting Aboriginal people in the Pilbara may not have been 'true small-pox':

that smallpox had broken out amongst the Aboriginal people on the Maitland River, and that two were dead and many others were ill. The disease, Sholl stated, had 'steadily advanced from Exmouth Gulf, & is carried from place to place by the natives'. He was concerned that it would spread to the Aboriginal camps around Roebourne, and then infect the Aboriginal divers employed in the pearling industry:

would have a significant impact on the recruitment of Aboriginal divers for the boats:

Kearney at Exmouth Gulf had caught the disease and died (*Inquirer and Commercial News*, 16 February 1870: 2). A month later, the same newspaper reported:

the identification of smallpox as the disease affecting the Aboriginal people in the Pilbara at that time. It is evident that despite a disease similar to smallpox being present in that area since 1865, the authorities never sent a trained medical officer there to investigate further.

By the 1830s most British arrivals in Australia were either variolated, vaccinated or had immunity via a prior infection (Butlin 1983: 25). At least some native-born

settlers would have been variolated or vaccinated locally, but many of them would never have seen an active case of smallpox and thus would have been unfamiliar with smallpox's symptoms, and unaware of the difference between the extremely lethal flat and haemorrhagic forms of the disease, the dangerous variola major and the relatively mild variola minor. Most of the native-born settlers may also have been largely ignorant of the symptoms of chickenpox, measles, influenza and other diseases which were common in Europe but which only arrived in Western Australia at various times

retrospective diagnosis of cases or outbreaks of disease in the distant past is always difficult and to some extent speculative. We can never be sure whether the 1789 outbreak was due to smallpox or chickenpox, but the scanty data available seem to me to favour smallpox, though the question of its origin is unexplained. (Hingston and Fenner 1985: 278)

The number of Aboriginal people who died during the epidemic in the North West – whether it was smallpox, chickenpox or something else – is unknown. It is probable that the disease was introduced in the Kimberley region by Macassan fishers in the early 1860s and had reached Roebuck Bay by March 1865 and the De Grey River not long afterwards. By January 1866 it had spread to Nickol Bay, and southwards as far as Carnarvon and Geraldton by early 1869. Contemporary accounts indicate that many people died at De Grey River and in the Roebourne area in 1866 and more died when it continued to spread southwards along the coast to Geraldton. It then seems to have returned to the Nickol Bay area in 1870 to infect Aboriginal divers on the pearling boats. It is likely that many Aboriginal people died on the coast or in the bush away from the European settlements and their

during the nineteenth century. Indeed, some historians and medical researchers have suggested that the 1789 epidemic, and perhaps the 1829-30 epidemic, too, were not smallpox but chickenpox, the effects of which in a 'virgin soil' population could have mortality rates similar to that of smallpox (Cumpston 1914: 7, 10, 124-5; Hunter and Carmody: 125-7). Frank Fenner, an Australian microbiologist and virologist who, as Chairman of the Global Commission for the Certification of Smallpox Eradication from 1967 to 1973, played a significant role in ridding the world of smallpox, said in 1985:

deaths went unrecorded. The disease was clearly very contagious and spread relatively easily along the coast. It is clear that the disease caused 'many' deaths over a wide area, but the historical records are too few and too fragmentary to allow any estimate to be made of Aboriginal morbidity or mortality during this epidemic. It is likely, however, that the death toll was in the hundreds rather than in the 'thousands', as Richardson suggested. There is no evidence that the disease, if it was smallpox, was one of the particularly lethal forms; if it was, perhaps it could be expected that at least some of the small number of Europeans who were reported to have caught the disease would have died, rather than suffering only mild symptoms, as seems to have nearly always been the case.

Measles

Measles is a highly infectious viral disease, usually spread by inhalation of aerosol droplets. The first symptoms are a fever and a characteristic blotchy red rash which appears first on the face and gradually spreads to cover the whole body. The rash is accompanied by fever, severe cough, conjunctivitis and runny nose. The mortality rate for adults is generally low, and deaths are usually the result of secondary infections such as encephalitis or pneumonia. The mortality rate is significantly higher for children, especially infants. Adults and children suffering malnutrition and unsanitary living conditions and those with chronic diseases or compromised immune systems are more likely to catch measles, and more likely to develop severe symptoms or secondary infections and other complications, such as deafness and blindness. Women who are pregnant when infected have an increased risk of miscarriage or premature birth.

Measles was endemic in Europe in the nineteenth century, and most children had had the disease by the age of 10, conferring lifelong immunity. The introduction of measles vaccines in the 1960s and a worldwide vaccination program has led to a reduction in the number of measles deaths from about 2 million people per year in the 1960s to just over 125,000 in 2021.

In populations which had no previous exposure to measles, mortality could be high. Dowling (2021: 68) noted that in 1848-9 a measles epidemic in Hawaii, in conjunction with whooping cough and influenza, killed about 10,000 people, or 10% of the population, and in Fiji in 1875 measles caused between 27,000 and 40,000 deaths, about a quarter of the population. When measles reached Rotuma, an isolated island about 600 km north of Fiji, in 1911, about 13% of the population died (Shanks et al. 2011).

Measles epidemic 1860–61

In the middle of 1860 there was an outbreak of measles in the Sydney area which quickly spread throughout the other colonies on the eastern coast. In Sydney it killed about 360 people, the majority of them young children (Curson 1985: 57).⁵ Cases of measles were first recorded

in Western Australia in August 1860 at Albany and the disease was spreading widely in Perth by December. It soon became apparent that Aboriginal people were especially vulnerable to the disease. The *Inquirer* announced in early January:

the number of cases is increasing and the symptoms are becoming more grave. Many families have sickness, more or less severe, following an attack of the measles and, we regret to state that during the week there have been several deaths among children, the consequence of this disease. The natives are severely affected, and with them the result is generally fatal. A lad named Jacob, an aboriginal witness in one of the cases to be heard at the Quarter Sessions, died yesterday, after an illness of very short duration. (*Inquirer and Commercial News*, 2 January 1861: 2)

Some years later William Knight, the Registrar-General in Perth, observed:

In regard to Measles, it has been unknown until about the middle of the year 1860, when a vessel arrived at King George's Sound from South Australia, landing a person affected by it. The disease soon spread, and fixed its strongest hold on the Native Population. From Albany it was conveyed to Perth and York by persons overtaken by it whilst journeying from one place to another. When once established in these towns, it spread by regular and progressive steps from one station to another, until every remote part of the Colony had been visited, and in its career leaving many victims. In old established countries this disease is never quite absent, being incidental to youth, and seldom occurs in mature age; but here, where it paid a first visit, it had a wider range, and its most fatal and grievous attacks were those of young nursing mothers, where both mother and child were destroyed. (Knight 1870: 26)

Knight recorded 59 deaths from measles among the settler population between 1860 and 1861. Fifty of those deaths occurred in Perth or Fremantle and the remainder were in York and other towns to the east. The majority (51) of the deaths were children, most of them under five

years of age, and the remaining deaths comprised eight women, all but one 'nursing mothers'.

No estimate was given of Aboriginal mortality but Knight acknowledged that measles had a more serious impact amongst them:

With the Aborigines the disease caused a wide spread desolation, extending from tribe to tribe with most fatal consequences. The Local Government did everything which could be devised to alleviate the sufferings of these poor people, by the establishment of temporary hospitals, and supplying food, medicines, and comforts, but in every District of the Colony the Deaths were very numerous, as the habits of the natives are so unfavorable in the progress of a disease of this nature, and their mode of treatment so utterly at variance with all rules of medical science. (Knight 1870: 29)

The historical sources indicate that Aboriginal people were particularly susceptible to measles and suffered a mortality rate significantly higher than that of the settler population. As was the case with smallpox, the highly infectious nature of measles and sudden onset of symptoms meant that all the members of an Aboriginal camp could be incapacitated almost simultaneously, leaving no one to care for the sick. This epidemic only seems to have affected the south-west corner of the

colony, extending as far northwards as New Norcia and Champion Bay, and eastwards to York and Albany. The number of Aboriginal deaths is impossible to estimate from the few scattered references in the historical sources, but the high mortality rates indicated by the accounts from Albany and York, if applied across that wider area, suggest a high death toll – at least three or four hundred.

Measles epidemic 1883–84

While the measles epidemic in the eastern states in 1874–75 did not spread to Western Australia, the colony was not so fortunate when another epidemic spread through the colonies in the east early in the following decade (Cumpston 1927: 248). It first arrived in August 1883 at Albany, where there were some deaths among the settlers and more among the Aboriginal people, as the District Medical Officer reported: 'I am sorry to say the disease amongst the natives proved very fatal to the eastward, but those in our neighbourhood, and more civilized, did very well, the mortality being very low indeed' (cited in Cumpston 1927: 228). From Albany, measles spread to Fremantle and Perth while also spreading throughout the South West. In September Aboriginal prisoners from Albany suffering from measles were transferred to Rottnest and that disease soon broke out there. It followed almost immediately in the wake of an outbreak of influenza that had killed up to 50 prisoners in September (*West Australian*, 31 July 1883: 2; Green and Moon 1997: 30). More than a hundred prisoners became ill from the measles but there were apparently no fatalities (*Inquirer and Commercial News*, 16 July 1884: 3).

By December it was estimated there were 3,000 people ill with measles in Fremantle and Perth and there had been a number of deaths, particularly among infants (*Daily News*, 8 December 1883: 3). It had soon spread to 'almost every district of the colony' and was making 'very rapid progress' at York and the country to the east, and northwards towards New Norcia (*Inquirer and Commercial News*, 26 December 1883: 5). The deaths of 129 people from measles were recorded in Western Australia between late 1883 and early 1885, of whom more than 60% were children under 10 (Cumpston 1927: 225, 230). That figure may include some Aboriginal people in the Perth area whose deaths were officially recorded but it is unlikely to include Aboriginal deaths beyond the settled areas.

The natives have suffered very severely from the measles up the river, several having died from the disease. They have all left the port on account of it. A sad death from the same cause occurred here on the 9th of last month, when a young teamster succumbed to the effects of measles after a severe delirium lasting for more than a week, during which time it sometimes required three or four men to hold him down. This was the second death of a white man occurring within a very short time, and shows the great necessity for a medical man in the district. (*West Australian*, 13 May 1884: 3)

In June 1884 measles reached Cossack and some of the white residents were sick. A correspondent of the *West Australian* wrote: 'I expect [measles] will spread over the country and carry off the natives, as a number of them are suffering from affections [sic] of the chest, and are not fit subjects to battle with the disease' (*West*

By March Aboriginal people in the country east of York had caught the measles and it was 'carrying them off wholesale' (*West Australian*, 11 March 1884: 3). Another report referred to measles spreading in the eastern district, where 'several aboriginal natives have succumbed to the fatal effects of this dangerous disease' (*Daily News*, 21 March 1884: 3). Aboriginal people in the South West who had been infected during the previous epidemic would have had immunity, but those who were not infected in 1860–61 and children born since that time were susceptible to the new outbreak. Whereas within the white population measles mainly affected children, the disease seems to have infected Aboriginal people of all ages.

Measles was carried to the ports north of Perth by coastal steamers in late 1883. The 1860–61 epidemic had evidently not spread beyond Champion Bay, so Aboriginal people further to the north along the coast had no immunity. In February 1884 some Aboriginal people at Shark Bay became ill from measles (*Victorian Express*, 13 February 1884: 2) and the disease was making 'sad havoc among the natives' there and at Wooramel a month later (*Daily News*, 17 March 1884: 3). Measles was also 'raging' at Geraldton and in the north-eastern districts of the colony. It was feared that the 'mortality among the aboriginal natives will be very great' (*Daily News*, 10 March 1884: 3).

In March a settler died from measles at Carnarvon (*Daily News*, 7 March 1884: 3). By the following month the disease was 'raging' there, 'and the blacks have got it'; a few weeks later, 'several natives succumbed' there (*Victorian Express*, 14 May 1884: 3; 21 May 1884: 3). By that time measles was also spreading among Aboriginal people in the Gascoyne (*Herald*, 8 March 1884: 3). A Carnarvon correspondent of the *West Australian* reported in May:

Australian, 10 June 1884: 3).

In early July two white men and a child died from measles in Roebourne. There had been at least two deaths in the Aboriginal camps near Cossack:

⁵ Another measles epidemic in Sydney in 1867 was responsible for 748 deaths, nearly 700 of them children aged under eight years (Curson 1985: 67).

A native named 'Old Man' and another well known as 'King Mulligan'⁶ have died at Cossack. There would have been greater mortality among the natives were it not that their employers isolated them as far as practicable. This however can only be done to natives in service; among those who roam abroad I fear we shall hear of many casualties. (*West Australian*, 17 July 1884: 3)

The number of Aboriginal people who died while 'roaming abroad', away from the town, is unknown. Later that month measles claimed another victim in Roebourne, Farquhar McRae, at the age of 39 (*West Australian*, 9 August 1884: 3). The brother of Alex, he had participated in the Flying Foam Massacre in 1868 and led the punitive expedition at the so-called Battle of Minderoo in 1869.

By August measles was spreading among both the settler and Aboriginal populations in the Murchison district 'with alarming rapidity' and was also causing much sickness in the Ashburton district (*Victorian Express*, 10 September 1884: 3). In July measles had

Mr Edgar engaged a duly qualified medical practitioner specially to attend to them and kept him on the station some months, with a staff of white men to assist in keeping the natives indoors, a large woolshed having been converted into a hospital for the occasion. Notwithstanding all the care and attention bestowed upon them, over fifty were carried off by the epidemic, and it was noticeable that the greatest mortality occurred amongst the most domesticated and better fed natives; those coming in from the bush got over the sickness more easily. Mr John Edgar gave his whole time to those sick natives until severely attacked himself, when for some days he was in imminent danger. (*West Australian*, 6 April 1886: 3)

By the end of 1884 measles had reached the southern Kimberley coast. The master of a pearling boat at Roebuck Bay died from measles in December 1884 (*Herald*, 21 February 1885: 3) and Aboriginal people in the area were also infected (*Victorian Express*, 11 March 1885: 2). Measles seems to have abated along the Pilbara and Gascoyne coasts by then but there is some evidence that it was spreading inland. In December Aboriginal people at Milly Milly in the East Murchison were suffering from the disease (*Victorian Express*, 12 September 1885: 3) and in February 1885 'several natives' were reported to be dying from measles in the Upper Murchison (*Victorian Express*, 11 February 1885: 3). At Tableland Station, near Millstream, many Aboriginal people were sick and there had been 'a few deaths' (*West Australian*, 18 February 1885: 3). In June measles was also said to be prevalent on the Upper Gascoyne and 'a number of natives' had died there (*Inquirer and Commercial News*, 8 August

reached the De Grey River. About a hundred Aboriginal people were ill there and one man and one child died, along with two white children. The station owner, Mr Edgar, fearful of losing his large Aboriginal workforce to the disease, engaged a live-in doctor to treat the patients on the station (*West Australian*, 9 August 1884: 3). Despite the care of the doctor, about 50 Aboriginal people died from measles there in October, and a white woman on the station also succumbed (*West Australian*, 23 October 1884: 3). A year or so later, a visitor to the area provided some details of what happened there:

1885: 5). The disease was also spreading northwards along the coast.

This epidemic, which originated in Albany in August 1883, spread slowly along the entire coast northwards from Perth, reaching Shark Bay and Carnarvon by March 1884, Roebourne by June and the De Grey River in August. By the time the disease reached the Kimberley region in September it was also spreading inland up the Murchison and Gascoyne rivers. The historical accounts refer to measles 'raging' through the Aboriginal camps and causing 'sad havoc', and there are many scattered reports such as 'several natives succumbed', 'several having died', 'a few deaths' and so on. Many Aboriginal deaths went unrecorded. If the high mortality reported at the De Grey was replicated in Aboriginal camps at isolated spots along the coast or in the ranges inland – where there was no European witness – the death toll in the Pilbara could have been in the hundreds.

Population decline

In the 1880s and 1890s coastal shipping brought new diseases such as measles, influenza, whooping cough, chickenpox, mumps and scarlet fever from Perth to the North West. These diseases and perhaps others may also have been introduced by Malays and other foreign divers recruited for the pearling industry. The older settlers may have had some immunity to those diseases but the native-born settlers and Aboriginal people would have had no previous exposure. Newspaper accounts provide some insight into the appearance of new or unidentified diseases. For example, an 'epidemic of cold and fever', perhaps influenza, broke out amongst the Aboriginal camps at Shark Bay in August 1885 and 19 people were reported to have died (*West Australian*, 19 September 1885: 9). At the same time measles and whooping cough were both 'troublesome' to Aboriginal people in the Derby area (*Victorian Express*, 19 September 1885: 3). Whooping cough caused 15 deaths amongst the settlers at Geraldton in 1885 (Cumpston 1927: 280) and that disease was also present at Roebourne and Geraldton in the following year (*Victorian Express*, 10 April 1886: 2).

A disease described as 'fever with symptoms of influenza' was 'raging' in Roebourne in early 1896, but there is no indication whether it had spread to the Aboriginal population (*Northern Public Opinion*, 7 March 1896: 2). Influenza reached Wyndham in early 1897; in June it was still prevalent and the Aboriginal people were 'the chief victims' (*Western Mail*, 2 July 1897: 28). In August 1897 it was reported that 'large numbers' of the Aboriginal people at Wedge's Station near Port Hedland were suffering severely from influenza (*Pilbarra Goldfields News*, 13 August 1897: 2). Outbreaks of scarlet fever occurred at Derby in August 1886 (*Victorian Express*, 21 August 1886: 5) and at Geraldton in September 1891 (*Victorian Express*, 18 September 1891: 4).

Syphilis and other sexually transmitted diseases had probably been introduced to the Aboriginal people of the Pilbara by the early settlers and pearlmen, although it is possible that they were introduced earlier by Macassans. Syphilis, if not treated, causes damage to the heart, liver and other organs as well as the brain, the latter often leading to psychosis, and severe ulceration, sometimes resulting in blindness and deafness. Pregnant women infected with syphilis were likely to miscarry or to give birth prematurely. If the baby survived it was likely to have been infected in the womb and would have a much shortened life expectancy, and women infected with syphilis or other sexually transmitted diseases had decreased fertility rates. As documented by Pervan et

al. (2020: 91), the removal of thousands of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from their homelands around northern Australia to treat these types of diseases led to the dislocation of generations of people from their families, communities and Country, and was part of a pattern of racially based policies entrenched in Australian society that served to interrupt Aboriginal people's ability to remain connected to Country and undertake cultural practices and responsibilities.

The successive epidemics and outbreaks of introduced diseases that affected Aboriginal people since European settlement had a cumulative effect (Dowling 2021). Aboriginal people in the Pilbara suffered two deadly epidemics: smallpox in the 1860s and measles in the 1880s. Smallpox killed a significant number of Aboriginal people in the region between 1865 and 1870, and the disproportionate loss of women and young children would have led to gender imbalance and perhaps initiated a long-term population decline. Two decades later, measles also killed many Aboriginal people, particularly those who already had impaired immune systems due to other chronic infections, such as syphilis or tuberculosis, or were suffering from malnutrition and living in crowded town or station camps. Over the next few decades influenza, whooping cough, scarlet fever and other diseases all took their toll. The declining birth rate was exacerbated by the effects of sexually transmitted diseases, adding to the impact on intergenerational cultural transmission by the forced incarceration of senior male and female custodians on remote islands off the coast, like Bernier and Dorre Island lock hospitals.

The loss of lives of family and friends – and inevitable loss of social cohesion due to these epidemics – caused additional distress and shock among people who had survived other culture-contact encounters and led to significant disruptions to Aboriginal cultural and social practices. Marriage networks and trading links would have been further interrupted and the premature deaths of Elders, or their forced incarceration for years, would have resulted in significant loss of cultural knowledge transmission.

A. R. Brown, who conducted anthropological fieldwork with Ngarluma, Kariyarra and Yinjibarndi people in 1912, estimated that the Ngarluma had originally numbered about 500 to 600 people, but the population had been decimated by the time he worked there. He observed:

6 King Mulligan was the Ngarluma man known in the 1860s as Mullagough, the 'chief of the Tien Tsin tribe'.

There are very few survivors of the Ngaluma tribe, probably not more than sixty all told ... Their country was first occupied by the whites in 1864. In 1866 a large number of them died during an epidemic of smallpox. A little later an outbreak of measles caused a further decrease of the tribe. (Brown 1913: 170)

Island Lifeways in the Historical Period

Overview of sources

Our research demonstrates that there are archival manuscripts and early journal articles – particularly in the State Records Office and the State Library as well as in historical newspapers – which contain either direct or passing references to Aboriginal lifeways in the archipelago, from the earliest explorers to after the Flying Foam Massacre. For instance, Robert Sholl, the Government Resident in Roebourne (1865–1881), as well as submitting his regular reports to the Colonial Secretary's Office, maintained his own daily journals and occurrence books during his time at Roebourne. These journals and occurrence books are in SROWA (AU WA A792, Series S1750 and S1751; and see Forrest 1996). Also of particular interest are the William Shakespeare Hall Papers, 1861–95 (SLWA Acc. 2237A); McRae Family Correspondence, 1865–84 (SLWA MN2482) and the Journal of Ellen Richardson, 1873–76 (SLWA MN810, Acc. 2934A). Other more ethnographical and linguistic accounts are provided by observers such as Emile Clement (1899, 1903) and Durlacher (2013 [1903]), a resident of the North West in the 1870s and 1880s (see Chapter 11). There are photographs in collections which would be of great interest to the community today and which could cast further light on the material culture and personal adornment of people on Murujuga in this early phase of contact (for example, Figure 18.8). Ernest Lund Mitchell, amongst others, took numerous photographs of Aboriginal people in the Pilbara between 1910 and 1912, including at Roebourne and Cossack with others labelled only 'Pilbara' or 'the North-West' (see Sassoon 2004).

landed on Enderby Island, observed numerous fresh native foot-marks on the beach, and inside the sand ridge a recently dug well in a small gully ... No birds were seen; we returned to the ship, and shortly after natives were seen where we had landed. (The 'Saucy Jack' from Shark's Bay 1851)

And in June 1864 the crew of the *Flying Foam*, en route to Fremantle, landed on Lewis Island seeking the renowned

at sundown, fires were seen first upon Rosemary and then upon Enderby Islands; now these were not single fires, but large groups of fires indicating the presence of great numbers of natives. These people must be near water on one if not both of the islands. (*Exploration of the north-west coast* 1864, 10 June)

Similarly, R. H. Matthews had numerous Pilbara correspondents (his collection is held in the National Library) and Radcliffe-Brown did fieldwork in the Pilbara between 1910 and 1912, collecting genealogies from Ngarluma, Kariyarra and Mardudunhera people (these are held in the University of Sydney Anthropology Archive). Another source of information about life in the archipelago comes from museum collections of material culture from the wider north-west West Australian coast, as these provide insights into the use of natural materials by Aboriginal people for a wide range of purposes, from sustenance to medicine and social and religious life. These collections are held across the world, as ethnographic items from north-west Australia were in high demand in nineteenth and early twentieth-century museums. Emile Clement alone collected nearly 1,600 items from mainly north-west Western Australia, with a heavy focus on Ngarluma and Yinjibarndi items (Coates 1999; Paterson and Witcomb 2021).

Importantly, sources reveal that family groups lived on the outer islands both before and after the Flying Foam Massacre. While people were not always seen, the extensive evidence of their habitation was remarked upon by all, and this at many times of the year. Phillip Parker King's 1818 visit (in February) recorded evidence of recent site usage on Enderby and he encountered large family groups on the inner islands at this time. In October 1851 Helpmann on the *Saucy Jack* seeking guano,

water sources reported by the whalers. They found none – but noted:



Figure 18.8. Photograph of man and child at Roebourne taken by Ernest Lund Mitchell, 1910–12 (State Library of Western Australia, slwa_b2188909_6).

These historical insights and observations about Aboriginal people's life in the islands and in neighbouring country allow us to flesh out our interpretations of the archaeological evidence we have gleaned through excavation and assist in deciphering some of the more enigmatic rock art motifs which reflect material culture of the archipelago. Many of these insights overturn the idea of this being 'orphan country' – in the true sense of the word – from 1868, but speak to displacement and dispossession as well as underreporting of connection that has

Saltwater people of Murujuga

Many accounts indicate that the people of the archipelago were marine/coastal hunter-gatherer fisher people, with an extensive woven fibre-craft repertoire, most of which has not survived in the archaeological record. Grinding patches, however, are ubiquitous across the archipelago and speak to the production of fibre-crafts as well as food processing (Reynen and Morse 2016; and see this

The principal food of those within reach of the coast appears to be fish; nearly everyone carries a net, some of which are funnel-shaped, and others resembling small stake nets, made of a two stranded twine, which they make from the fibre of some variety of spinifex. The knot is the same as in ours, and they could not be distinguished from each other, except on close inspection. Neither the men nor the women appear to possess the smallest article in the shape of covering. (*Inquirer and Commercial News*, 30 September 1863: 3)

Early historical sources indicate the importance of fish and other marine foods to the Aboriginal people of the Pilbara area. Robert Sholl observed a more balanced diet, writing that the 'coast tribes subsist mainly on fish, seeds and roots' (*Inquirer and Commercial News*, 21 March 1866: 3), and Gregory has described what may have been a typical Aboriginal meal in the coastal areas. Near the

The coastal natives live chiefly upon Fish, Prawns, Crabs, Crayfish, Turtle and Dugong. They also eat Iguana, lizards, snakes, ants (particularly the white ants), various grubs especially the Bardies (called Mockayai) which they obtain chiefly from the Mangrove trees.

They eat all birds except carrion birds as the Eagle [(Wonbon)?], the crow (Wakara) & the Hawk [(Relleka)?]. The fruit of the mangrove and grass seeds are important items in their Bill of Fare, & occasionally they get Kangaroo, Emu and Turkey (the Bustard). (Brown 1905: 2–3).

The waters of the Dampier Archipelago were rich in fish, crabs, crayfish and other crustaceans and many edible species of shellfish were abundant in the coastal waters and mangroves. Aboriginal people also caught turtles and dugongs and perhaps dolphins or sharks. A beached whale may have occasionally provided a feast for everyone and, as detailed earlier, people would have accessed whale carcasses killed by whalers.

According to the vocabulary collected by Walcott at Nickol Bay in 1861, the local Aboriginal people had a

continued through to the native title era. The Burrup and Maitland Industrial Estates Agreement was signed before the coastal native title determinations were concluded and are a non-native title agreement for the lands earmarked for industry in this place (McDonald 2015b).

Our treatment of evidence here details maritime and terrestrial subsistence including preferred foods and equipment, other material culture, shelters, appearance and decoration, and funerary practices.

volume, chapters 6 and 8). Fibrecraft is also relatively rare in museum collections, but this was a significant component of the fishing and hunting toolkit used. A detailed report from J. B. Ridley to the Colonial Secretary on his expedition to the Nickol Bay area to examine more closely the area first explored by Gregory noted:

mouth of the De Grey River a group of Aboriginal people fled at Gregory's approach, leaving behind their evening meal in wooden dishes: 'their supper ... consisted of fish, rats, beans, grass seed cakes and a beverage made with some oily seed, pounded' (Gregory 1884: 84). James Brown, a resident of Roebourne in the 1880s, provided an overview of the Aboriginal diet:

barbed spear, *bilara*, and a 'common spear', *wera wera* (Gregory 1884: 97); the latter was probably an unbarbed fishing spear. H.A. Hall referred in his Ngarluma vocabulary to a long, heavy unbarbed fishing spear called wajera (1971: 26). Stow (1981 [1865]: 66) noted that the people of Dolphin Island had unbarbed spears, probably fishing spears, and short pointed sticks for stabbing turtles. The latter may have been the 'wooden skewers' which Durlacher said were used to blind dugong to render the creatures helpless. Thatcher stated that hunting spears had only single barbs, whereas spears

used for fighting had several rows of barbs. Thatcher described these spears in some detail:

Their weapons are much the same as those used in Swan River; their spears show rather more care and knowledge of barb-making, their fighting spears being barbed in three rows, and are formidable-looking weapons, but too heavy for quick use ... Their hunting

spear which has but one barb they throw from the rest [spear-thrower?], but the heavy fighting weapon simply with the hand. (Thatcher 1869, 23 October: 3). James Brown provided valuable information on Aboriginal fishing methods, including many details not recorded by other early observers:

Along the coast there are numerous inlets or creeks they are commonly called. As there is a rise & fall of between 20 & 30 ft along this coast, these tidal creeks are regularly more or less full & in a few hours dry. This affords the natives splendid opportunities for catching fish. These creeks are mostly fringed with dense forests of mangroves in and about which fish travel in search of food. Often there are holes, generally near the shore, or great rock basins, & in these fish are frequently left by the receding tide. They are then easily captured with the hand, or speared with a short stabbing spear. Not infrequently even sharks are left behind by the tide in this way. The natives also puddle in these holes or cavities with their feet, stirring up the mud & causing the fish to rise. On the fish showing themselves they are speared.

There is a very large species of crab, called by the natives 'Tarribal' weighing from 2 to 3 lbs. These are plentiful and are speared by the natives. The natives also catch crayfish, pulling them out of the holes in the rocks, & puddling them out of the mud in the creeks and off the islands. Their nets are also used, but chiefly to catch prawns. They are very successful in catching prawns. The net they use for this purpose has a very small mesh & is usually from 6 to 12 ft in length. This is dragged along the shores of the creeks [or?] islands & the supply which they are able to procure in the season is unlimited. (Brown 1905: 3–6)

According to Brown, Aboriginal people visited the islands offshore to collect the eggs of seabirds and turtles:

Along the coast there are a number of small islands which the natives are able to reach at low [springs?], as De Puke, Bezout, DeLambra, Ricard, & a long stretch of land just off the coast divided from the mainland by the Flying Foam passage. In these places chiefly the natives procure the eggs of seagulls, Red bills & other birds. They also obtain on these islands large quantities of Turtle eggs. The turtle makes a very broad track which is easily distinguished on the sand, & it is not difficult to find where the turtle she has laid her eggs. A nest will contain usually about a large bucket-full of eggs, & the sand covers them to only a depth of from 6 to 12 inches so they are dug out with the hands without much trouble. The natives often at night come on turtles well up in the sand with the tide out. Though the turtles make for the water with all possible speed, they are easily overtaken and safely secured for [?so soon] as the natives succeed in turning them over on their backs, they are helpless. (Brown 1905: 6–8).

The islands which Brown refers to above – Depuch, Bezout, Delambre and Ricard (possibly meaning Ronsard) – are all, except for Delambre, close to the mainland and relatively accessible at low tide. Perhaps Brown meant Legendre Island, not Delambre. Brown's 'long stretch of land divided from the mainland by the

Flying Foam passage' is possibly the Burrup Peninsula – now known as Murujuga.

A detailed account of the methods employed by Aboriginal people to catch turtles at sea was also provided by Brown:

Turtles often lie asleep on the water near the islands in the day time. A native will on seeing a sleeping turtle swim out, & when within about 10 yds, dive & come up under it. With remarkable quickness, the native mounts the turtle before it can escape & holding on by the edge of the back at either side with a fierce grip rides it ashore, or more often drowns it. He steers it by swaying his body in different directions; as for instance he will make the turtle sink by bending well forward, & forces it to the surface by leaning back. He is careful to keep his feet well away from the head of the turtle as its jaws are tremendously powerful and could with ease break a man's leg if they were closed upon it ... I speak with certainty regarding the mode of capturing turtle when lying apparently asleep or unconscious in the water, but as there may be some doubters like Thomas, I venture to record several instances which I witnessed.

Some 15 years ago I was on a boating holiday with some friends. We went out from Cossack to DeLambra & the Flying Foam passage. It was about Xmas time & the weather was very warm. We were one day in a dingey off DeLambra. It was about noon; very hot and not a breath of wind. Suddenly one of the party called out 'there's a turtle!'. The turtle was a few hundred yards away. We rowed quietly towards it. When about a 100 yards off a native named 'Whalebone' who was in our dingey slipped gently overboard. We stopped pulling. Whalebone swam within about 10 yds and then dived. In 2 or 3 minutes – it appeared much longer to us watching – he rose alongside the turtle. For a few seconds there was a most exciting struggle with great splashing of water, & then Whalebone was astride on its back. He tried to head it towards the shore about half a mile off but it always struggled to make for the open sea. For I should think about 15 minutes the struggle continued. The native was too much for the turtle & he [?kept] sinking it and bringing it to the surface until it became exhausted & drowned. We then threw a rope to Whalebone and towed him and the turtle about half a mile to the beach at DeLambra. We turned it over on the beach, cut its throat to let it bleed. It was a fine green turtle, & would have weighed from 180 to 200 lbs.

On another occasion I was at the Flying Foam passage, about 17 miles from Cossack & I saw the same thing repeated. In this case it was a native named Cockroach (– a man since well known to the police. He committed several murders, & I think has been hung) who effected the capture of the turtle. In this case Cockroach got astride of the turtle in the same way that Whalebone did but he did not drown it. He exhausted it, however, & forced it to the shore where with the assistance of us from the dingey, he turned it over. These are two cases I know of. (Brown 1905: 8–14).

Brown noted that a turtle was roasted whole on a big fire and any meat that was not eaten was cut into strips and sun-dried. When it was to be eaten it was moistened with water, pounded into a paste and then consumed.

Williams, aboard an American whaling vessel in the archipelago in the early 1840s, observed Aboriginal people catching turtles at sea after first blinding them

with a sharpened bone they normally wore through a hole in their nasal septum (1894: 44). A similar method was used to catch dugong. According to Durlacher, when these creatures were spotted offshore, the men took to the water and were directed to their prey by a man on a high vantage point on the coast. The swimmers were all armed with:

a sharp pointed wooden skewer. Some also bear with them a large strong net made of spinifex fibre and somewhat similar in form to a tennis net, having two wooden supports, one on each end. They also carry with them a number of smooth round stones about the size of a small apple. The native on the look out hill will be all the time informing the fishermen by hand signals how many Dugong he can see, the direction in which they are moving and other information, which may help the swimmers towards a successful capture. The men, when they arrive at the spot on the shore from whence they take to the sea to swim, divide into two parties, one party taking the net with which they swim cautiously towards the prey. The other natives swim out beyond the school so that the Dugong are between them and the shore. Then they form a sort of half circle, and move quietly towards the Dugong, the net bearers meanwhile still approaching them from the shore. These movements go on until both parties are close up to their game. Then at a given signal down go the half circle of swimmers beneath the water, the men with the net remaining on the surface holding the net straight up and down by means of the pole at each end, the swimmers having disappeared below the surface. If their movements could be watched, you would see them crawling quickly over the sea bed, each native as he moves along hitting together two stones which he has brought with him the concussion causing as is commonly known, a noise like a minute explosion. This has a most terrifying effect on the Dugong, which rush straight away from the sound and most likely one of them will dart straight into the net that is being held by the other natives. If one does get entangled, the fun and excitement commences, as the Dugong, finding itself entangled, plunges violently forward carrying net and fishermen with it. But the natives hold on firmly though they are dragged here and there, sometimes on the top of the water and sometimes underneath, and in the distance their black heads look like cork floats bobbing up and down. This is kept up until either fish or fishermen are exhausted. If the men get exhausted first, both net and Dugong are often lost, but if the reverse happens, the natives assisted by the other swimmers approaching their exhausted prey, gouge its eyes out with a sharp

pointed stick that they have brought with them. Then the poor creature is quite helpless and easily towed ashore. There is then jubilation among the natives as meat and oil is plentiful for a time, the oil especially having wonderful medicinal properties equal to the best Cod Liver Oil and natives with chest complaints thrive wonderfully, if they drink it, which a native will seldom refuse to do. (Durlacher 2013 [1900]: 61–2).

Fishing nets and traps

Sholl wrote that the coastal people were 'expert fishermen and secure their prey with spear, weir and net' (*Inquirer and Commercial News*, 21 March 1866: 3). In this project, stone structures found at a number of coastal sites on Murujuga are assumed to have been constructed to operate as tidal fish traps (see chapters 4 and 6). Fish remains occur in archaeological sites (see chapters 6, 8 and 15) and numerous species of fish are depicted in rock art (see Chapter 16) as well as all six known species of turtle (Chapter 17).

There are numerous references to the use of fishing nets by Aboriginal people in the Nickol Bay area. At Hearson Cove, Gregory saw 'seventeen natives pass across the shoals at low water, carrying nets but no weapons' and later he came upon a group of Aboriginal people mending their nets on the beach (Gregory 1884: 58, 73). Both Gregory and W. S. Hall (SLWA Acc. 2237A:

16 July 1861) recorded an encounter with some men who were drawing their nets across a small creek west of the Sherlock River. Ridley, at Tien Tsin in 1863, described two kinds of nets: 'Nearly everyone carried a net, some of which are funnel shaped and others resembling small stake nets, made up of a two-stranded twine' (SLWA Exploration Diaries Vol 5: 78).

Thatcher wrongly believed that the art of net-making must have been introduced to the Aboriginal people by a European in the distant past: 'Some shipwrecked sailor must at some time or another have taught them net-making, as they fish with nets made of the same mesh, as is now used by Europeans' (Thatcher 1869, 23 October: 3). As well as the small funnel-shaped nets and stake nets, larger nets were also made. One was brought to Perth in 1887 by a police inspector returning from Roebourne:

a really beautiful weir fishing net, made by the aboriginal natives of the North-West, district of this Colony. The net – which is of course hand-made – is manufactured out of spinifex, and is twenty-seven feet in length by three in width, with perfectly knotted meshes of an inch each. The material is beautifully twisted and the net will compare even more than favourably with those made by civilized men. An examination of this net will prove that we possess a most valuable fibre-producing material in the much despised spinifex, which may some day become worth exporting when its peculiar properties are more widely known. (*Daily News* 18 February 1887: 3).

This 'weir fishing net' was probably set across the mouth of a coastal creek to trap fish on the outgoing tide. It is likely that the Aboriginal people also used these large nets in the shallows, perhaps in communal fish drives, and they were also employed to capture dugongs. Examples of constructed stone weirs as well as stone structures likely to have secured fishing nets have been recorded on a number of islands around the archipelago (e.g. Enderby, Gidley and Tozer islands).

Baskets and carrying bags were also made from

It consists of two strands, and is apparently as strong, and not unlike in appearance, being rather darker, the rope brought from Manilla. When bleached and coiled it would no doubt be difficult to determine any difference, except perhaps by the slightly irregular strands, regard to which, no doubt, our natives have yet to learn the necessity of observing. (*Inquirer and Commercial News*, 1 July 1868: 5).

According to Durlacher, spinifex nets, rope and twine were made from two species of spinifex known as 'blue

spinifex fibre, according to Richardson (Curr 1886, Vol. 1: 297) and, according to H. A. Hall (1971: 5), fine-meshed bags were used to carry 'prawns, cockles, crabs etc'. In June 1868 a sample of rope, 'manufactured by the natives of Nickol Bay' from spinifex fibres, as well as nardoo, samples of spinifex netting, some spears and a large wooden dish, was brought to Perth by John Watson, the master of the pearling boat *Charon*. The *Inquirer* reported:

spinifex' and 'hill spinifex':

The plants are of stunted appearance and grow in small round clumps; one kind is known as blue spinifex and the other as hill Spinifex. The blue is so called from the blueish green appearance of

the leaf; the natives collect the leaves of these plants which they tie in small bundles and after doing this, they are soaked in water for some days, which toughens the fibre. When ready for use, each bundle is taken out separately as required and placed on a large flat stone which is procured for the purpose. It is then pounded with a round smooth stone; the native women being very careful when performing this work not to bruise the fibre too much as too much pounding would weaken it. After this operation is performed it is again placed in water from which it is taken as required for weaving into material for net making. The weaving is done by using one hand to pierce the fibre, the rolling being done on the woman's leg as she squats on the ground by means of the spindle, an illustration of which has been given above. Another woman receives the manufactured fibre as it comes from the spindle and winds it on to a wooden shuttle, after which it is ready to be made up into bags or fish nets. (Durlacher 2013: 81)

Terrestrial food resources

Murujuga and the larger islands of the archipelago were home to rock wallabies and euros and a range of smaller mammals as well as emus, bush turkeys and other birds and lizards and snakes – these are found in archaeological deposits and rock art (see chapters 6 and 15). There are no historical observations of Aboriginal people exploiting the terrestrial food resources in the archipelago but there are accounts of Aboriginal hunting techniques utilised on the nearby mainland. There, large game animals were hunted with spears, propelled by spearthrowers, and boomerangs and throwing sticks. Gregory observed, near the upper reaches of the Sherlock River, several Aboriginal people capturing partridges with spinifex nets:

they place ragged bushes all around the small pools with the exception of a few spaces five or six feet wide from which openings they stick in a double row of twigs, arching so as to meet overhead in the centre one or two feet from the ground; these little avenues lead away for several yards, and then terminate with a net thrown over a few light sticks at the end. The birds first alight on the margin of the pool, but after drinking, do not take flight at once, but run up the only opening, which leads them first under the arch of twigs and finally into the net, which is then drawn to by the hunter lying in wait under a few bushes. In this way they must capture a large amount of game, judging by the quantity of feathers around some of the waterholes (Gregory 1884: 71).

According to Withnell, nets were also used to capture larger game at waterholes.

Aborigines constructed a pathway of boughs, with a wide entry and a narrow exit, near a pool. At first, kangaroos and emus would be too wary to drink there but after a few days they would become accustomed to the presence of the trap. A net was then placed over the exit and the hunters concealed themselves nearby. When an animal entered the pathway they rushed out from their hiding places and frightened the animal into the net. Once trapped, it could easily be killed with spears or clubs. (Withnell 1901: 19–20)

A similar technique was reported by Brown:

Turkey and Emu are often speared. But they are frequently cleverly caught with nets. Two or three nets are fastened together, making a 20 or 30 feet net. This is spread over a waterhole, and the front part carefully screened with sand & pegged down securely. The natives then lie in ambush behind spinifex bushes usually & when a turkey or emu come to water, the natives run out behind them. The birds run forward & try to force their way through, but the net is fast in [front?] & [...] at the sides & while they are struggling under the net the natives spear them or knock them over with waddies. (Brown 1905: 15–16).

Withnell described pit-traps being dug along game trails and the following method for catching hawks:

They procure a small rat and tie it to a small rod about 2ft long. They then light fires, which attract the hawks, and hide themselves in a large bunch of spinifex or 'torrida grass'. The rod is gently moved in the open with the left hand; in the right they hold a club called 'Wakaboora'. The hawk swoops down for the rat and receives the club instead. I have seen them get fully a dozen in this manner in a few hours. (Withnell 1901: 21)

Brown also referred to Aboriginal people consuming 'white ants', probably termites, and their nests and also robbing wild beehives of their honey:

The white ants they dig out with sticks, & eat with the earth. The ants' nest seems to be as much appreciated as the ants, & their beards and mouths are covered with dirt after they have been feeding on the white ants. There is a small species of wild bee, which make their home sometimes in a hollow tree. When their bees have completed their labours the hive contains only about a quart of honey. When the natives rob them they eat not only the honey but the wax & the bees bread. (Brown 1905: 14-5).

According to Durlacher (2013 [1900]: 22–3), extracting the honey was sometimes a more laborious task requiring the use of a stone axe to chop deeply into a tree to find

the hive. Large grubs called Bardies or Mockayai which Aboriginal people obtained 'chiefly from the Mangrove trees' were also an important food item. (Brown 1905: 2).

Plant foods

Again, while no accounts exist of the use of plants in the islands, there are accounts of the nearby mainland which are directly relevant. Archaeological evidence for processing of plant remains have been found on islands during this project, as grinding patches and in the form of plant residues found on stone tools (see especially chapters 5, 7 and 9).

The gathering and processing of some plant foods required specialised equipment and collection methods. W. S. Hall, a member of Gregory's exploring party, recorded in his diary on 16 July 1861 that the Europeans had disturbed an Aboriginal camp near the mouth of the Sherlock River: 'we found much grass seed in their camp; in course of preparation for food' (SLWA Acc. 2237A). According to Alexander Richardson (in Curr 1886: 297),

I have seen the natives inhabiting the Flying Foam Islands and Hampton Harbour country boiling the yellow fruit of the mangrove in large conch shells, but frequently the shells crack with the heat and the contents get spilled. The mangrove fruit ... require to be buried for a period to exhaust its poisonous properties. (Durlacher c. 1910).

H. A. Hall (1971: 22), Harper (in Curr 1886: 289) and Brown (1905) also refer to the cooking and consumption of these fruit.

Brown described the method of grinding seeds into flour:

the natives have a rough mill on which they grind and pound seeds and other things. The mill is merely a flat stone, usually about a foot square. A large round waterworn stone, about the size of an emu egg, is used in the hand. This is worked with a circular motion over the flat stone beneath & grinds up whatever is between the two. There is usually a considerable cavity in the flat stone, it becoming worn in the centre from the constant grinding stone worked by the hand. These rude mills are often carried about by their owners for months, I think I may say sometimes for years ... Inland the natives depend largely upon the chindarbie & other grass seeds. A native man will sit at the mill & pound away at a quantity of seeds & lick them off the stone as he goes on. When he is satisfied his woman & children will feed themselves in the same way. A little water from a conk shell [near?] is used to wet the hand stone & the mill & this makes the seeds, or the flour pounded from them, adhere & prevents it flying away. Sometimes the natives used to grind up a quantity of such flour, mix it with water & make a damper in the ashes. But it is unusual for them to take this trouble. They were generally satisfied to lick it off the stone during the process of grinding. (Brown 1905: 19–22)

Brown noted that Aboriginal people robbed the stores of seeds that ants collected in their underground nests:

There is a small black ant that is very industrious, & gathers in its nest a large quantity of grass seeds. The natives go to work with digging sticks & root these nests up, until they get at the store. They then rob the ants of all the grain. The natives often get as much as a bucket full of seeds from one nest. (Brown 1905: 16–17)

Material culture

In addition to the food quests detailed here, early historical accounts provide some further information on the material culture and social practices of the Yaburara and nearby coastal people. The later ethnographic sources – Richardson, 'Yabaroo', Clement and Withnell – are generally concerned with the Aboriginal people of the inland but contain much information useful to the discussion of the coastal tribes. Clement (1903) provided an illustrated and descriptive catalogue of the ethnographic objects he collected during his travels in the

North West, in order to encourage museums to buy his collections. He provides relatively detailed descriptions of a wide range of weapons, implements and ornaments from the Pilbara, including some specifically identified as being from Nickol Bay. The following list shows items of material culture included in the vocabularies of Walcott (Gregory 1884), Richardson, Clement and H. A. Hall. Those marked with an asterisk were reported by Walcott and thus relate to the Hearson Cove area:

spears (general)*	log	needle for
unbarbed fishing spear*	shield	net-making
many barbed spear	throwing stick	woman's fighting pole
fishing net*	boomerang	digging stick
net bag	wooden club	wooden scoop
hair-belt	stone knife*	grinding stone
spear-thrower*	stone axe*	ochre
canoe/swimming	twine/cord*	scoop shell*
		(probably baler shell)

Women used digging sticks to obtain roots, vegetables and small game, and wooden scoops or dishes to winnow grass seed and to carry food or water. Baler and conch shells also made useful receptacles (W. S. Hall SLWA AN2237A: 16/7/1861; Harper in Curr 1886: 288) and, according to Brown (1905: 5), they were used 'not only on the coast but also inland'.

Shelters

The project has found archaeological evidence for residential structures on the islands: cleared areas, placed stones and associated grinding patches, for example on Rosemary Island, where dated occupation deposits suggest these structures may be 8,000 years old (Chapter 8). On Intercourse Island, in 1818, King saw several 'native huts': 'of most miserable construction, being nothing more than a bush stuck in the ground and forming only a very indifferent shade' (King 1827, Vol. 1: 43). Stow (1981 [1865]: 65) noted 'breakwinds of bushes'

Belts were spun from human hair and worn around the waist, according to Richardson (in Curr 1886: 297). Hair string belts, many with attached bone and pearlshell, are very common in Clement's collections. These are mostly made from human hair, but also used introduced animal hair such as wool from sheep.

near the Nickol Bay shore and, on Depuch Island in 1840, Stokes (1846: 169) found several 'huts': 'they were constructed of boughs and twigs fixed in the ground and joined overhead in a circular shape. Over this was thrown a loose matting of twisted grass'. Stokes might have been describing a shelter used in wet weather, while those seen by King and Stow may have been simple summer breakwinds. None of these observations describe the use of stone in these residential structures.

Physical appearance and ornamentation

Many of the early historical accounts make mention of the Dampier Archipelago and Nickol Bay area. King described the man taken aboard his vessel as:

a well made man, and was at least six feet in height. His hair was long and curly, and in it was stuck a short, sharp pointed stick; he wore his beard long, no teeth were wanting in his jaws and there was no appearance of the septum narium having been pierced; at every three inches between the upper part of the chest and the navel, his body was scarified in horizontal stripes, the cicatrice of which was at least an inch in diameter and protruded half an inch from the body. He could not have been more than twenty-two or three years of age. (King 1827, Vol. 1: 42)

Two sketches of this man and his craft accompany King's journal (Figure 18.5). Gregory also wrote favourably of the two Aboriginal men who paddled out to the *Dolphin* in Hearson Cove:

they were both fine-looking men, of about 40 years of age, above the middle stature, one measuring six feet four inches and the other five feet eight inches, their hair straight and black ... neither of these natives were circumcised or had lost the front teeth. (Gregory 1884: 56)

Jarman, Padbury and Nairn described the Aboriginal people at Tien Tsin Bay as 'fine looking fellows', 'tall and muscular' and 'great giants' (SLWA Exp. Diaries: Vol. V: 52, 60, 78) and Stow (1981 [1865]: 66) wrote that one of the men he met on Dolphin Island 'stood more than six feet without his stockings of course and most of his companions were above the medium height'. Some of the other accounts mention that the Aboriginal people scarified their chests, but the most detailed description is that by King.

King made no mention of any dress or ornamentation on the Aboriginal people (apart from a short stick through the hair) and, according to Gregory, the two who

visited his ship wore not 'a vestige of clothing'. Ridley wrote from Tien Tsin Bay that the Aboriginal people there were entirely naked (SLWA Exp. Diaries: Vol. V: 78). Further, according to Thatcher (1869, 23 October: 3): 'A kind of pigment called "wilgie", smeared over their faces and a tuft of wild dog's tails tied to their beards make them look quite formidable'.

Later ethnographic accounts, written when the Europeans had had more prolonged contact with Aboriginal people and the opportunity to observe them in a wider variety of situations, provide some additional information on how Aboriginal people adorned themselves. Richardson wrote:

instead of clothes, a few green leaves were suspended from a hair girdle round the waist, but clothes are now obtained from the Whites. These they take off at night and sleep naked as formerly, with a small fire at each side of them. For ornaments, they wear on their heads, attached to bands of twisted human hair, pieces of pearl shell and rat's tails. They knot their beards and smear their persons with a compound of grease and red ochre, especially on the occasion of corroborees. (in Curr 1886: 297)

Withnell also commented on Aboriginal hairstyles and body decorations:

As ornament they fasten rats' tails, or twist and spin up their relatives' hair, with which they dress up their own, binding it together to prevent it from falling over their eyes, as they wear their hair long and greasy, rubbing emu fat, etc. on it. This hair dress is not at all picturesque. For, owing to continual grease and dirt it forms into knots, each often matted into five pounds weight. They are particularly fond of greasing their bodies and rubbing on decayed ironstone (ochre), white chalk, and charcoal. (Withnell 1901: 13)

Pieces of pearl shell were ground into oval shapes, incised with designs and worn by the coastal tribes as penis or chest ornaments (Clement 1903; Burges 1913: 4; Hall 1971: 25).

Although engravings of human figures wearing headdresses are common on Murujuga and the islands of the archipelago, there are no descriptions of these items in the historical and early ethnographic sources, although men with headdresses were photographed

by Mitchell in Roebourne in 1910 (NLA, PIC Drawer PM 4518 #PIC/P161/5). These include a pair of long sticks radiating out from the head of one man. Palmer (1975) discussed the engravings with Aboriginal informants and was told that on ceremonial occasions men wore a headdress consisting of sticks radiating out from a headband, while women wore a similar headdress but with the radiating sticks interwoven with twigs and foliage.

Burial practices

Aboriginal burials, possibly involving secondary or tertiary burial practices, have been discovered archaeologically (see Enderby Island, Chapter 6). Burial customs reported historically reveal burials as well as primary and secondary treatment of the person's remains.

On the Fortescue River, W. S. Hall found the remains of an Aboriginal person in a tree (SLWA Acc. 2237A: 1/6/1861), and in Nickol Bay, Stow (1981 [1865]: 65) in 1865 found a native burial ground 'almost in the bed of the creek'. Neither writer, however, provided further details. Withnell wrote:

The body is placed in a grave about four feet deep, generally in a sitting posture facing the direction of its

birthplace and is covered over with paperbark. Then the grave is filled in with earth ... If the deceased has been a good sportsman they often place his body among the rocks, and after a time his family circle gather and keep in their possession his small bones which are supposed to impart to them his skill in hunting. (Withnell 1901: 36)

Clement (1903: 8) wrote that bodies were either left on hilltops to mummify or were placed in shallow graves. Some tribes, he noted, placed the dead on tree platforms or in hollow tree trunks. James Brown, of Roebourne, told Daisy Bates that the dead were buried in a sitting position, facing east, with the hands and feet tied together to prevent the spirit wandering about (Brown c. 1910).

Discussion

The historical accounts and ethnohistorical records presented here significantly augment the archaeological record and *complement* our understanding of the historical events at Murujuga. When combined with and compared to the archaeological record, this project has revealed the ways in which the historical accounts, while biased, incomplete and fragmentary, provide significant insights into the history of the islands, in particular the ways in which colonial settlement and invasion operated against Yaburara people.

The historical accounts provide peripheral insights into life in the islands, in particular the use of watercraft to move between the islands – a technical maritime capability which is poorly understood today. There are no surviving examples of these watercraft, and the primary historical account – and images – is that from Phillip Parker King's expedition. There are few later accounts suggesting ongoing use of watercraft. Watson (*West Australian* 5 August 1933: 5; referring to 1868) stated: 'the North-West natives used, as a common practice, to cross from the mainland to the adjacent islands on logs of 'kajaput,' a local timber with the buoyancy of cork', while Brown (1916) identified two types of rafts north of Shark Bay, their differential distribution coinciding with "a boundary between two culture areas ... (; but that) ... at the present day they are rarely, if ever, used" (Brown 1916: 9). As described earlier, during the 1868 massacre, there is an account of Aboriginal people escaping across Searipple Passage 'in small watercraft'. The fact that the technology existed to more safely access the islands has a direct bearing on the interpretation of the archaeological and historical records, which support the use of the islands by family groups. The archaeological record from the last 7,000 years suggests that this technology was in place, and invites further research into the longer history of maritime technology in the west Pilbara.

These sources, along with the evidence presented elsewhere in this book for the historical presence of Aboriginal people in the archipelago, reveal how people continued to live in some fashion in island Murujuga. For example, after the killing of Griffis in 1868, Robert Sholl chartered a cutter, as he clearly recognised that people would use the islands as a refuge (part of their home estate): 'The object I had in view in chartering the *Albert* was that assistance might be rendered to the land party in the event of the murderers escaping to the islands' (CSO 3679/1886, Sholl to Withnell, 11 February 1868). The presence of family groups on islands continued; Watson (1933), for example in 1868, on Legendre 'found camped at least 20 natives, men, women, and children'.

There are also sources that reveal the competencies and practices of Yaburara life in the islands. For example, Yaburara people were very strong swimmers, as indicated by multiple accounts. There was inter-island communication facilitated by the use of signal fires (CSO 3679/1886, Withnell to Sholl, 25 February 1868). Water was available even on (apparently, to white observers) waterless islands, for example Watson stated: 'They at first pretended there was no "baba" (water), but on one of our party pointing his revolver at them one made off and soon returned with a large shell full of pure water' (Watson 1933).

Further to our understanding of the ways that north-west Aboriginal people were subjugated on the colonial frontier through forced participation in pastoralism and pearling, we understand that Aboriginal people from the south were co-opted into policing duties in the North West, presumably because they had no kinship ties with the local people. 'Swan Valley natives' are mentioned in numerous contexts during the Flying Foam Massacre and reprisals as assisting in the

hunting and tracking of the local people, much in the same way that the Mounted Native Police in Queensland were used to effectively increase the capacity of remote policing (Burke et al. 2018). This is an area which is poorly understood in the west – but the killing of the policeman Griffis and his assistant Peter as well as the later strangling of Moro, Francisco's 'assistant' for aiding the reprisals (and Sholl's logic for the charging of four Indigenous men with his murder), indicates that these Aboriginal outsiders worked firmly within the authority of white assertions of law and order; and they appear to have been treated the same as the white authorities by Ngarda-ngarli in episodes of frontier violence. How were these people recruited into these roles – though coercion or compulsion? And how was this implementation of Indigenous knowledge by law enforcement sustained (officially or not; see Nettelbeck and Ryan 2018)? This is an area of research which has not been extensively explored about the Western Australian frontier.

A close reading of historical sources equally enhances our understanding of significant historical processes with direct implications for our modelling of life in the archipelago in the years leading up to and immediately following European contact – in particular the killings of 1868 and the potential impact of measles and smallpox. It is clear that our understanding of island life has been dramatically restrained by the horrors of massacre and disease. Dowling (2021: 88) pointed out that Aboriginal people who already had impaired immune systems due to other chronic infections, such as syphilis or tuberculosis, were more susceptible to measles and more likely to develop severe symptoms of that disease. They were also more likely to develop secondary infections, such as pneumonia or bronchitis, especially if they were already suffering from malnutrition and living in unsanitary

conditions in town, station or pearling camps.

A reading of these sources requires a close sense of the nature of the colonial record. A distinct difference existed between the information provided to authorities about the murders by Aboriginal people and the murders of Aboriginal people. The reports by Sholl, and others, were reported verbatim in the *Inquirer and Commercial News*. Sholl's description of the scene of the initial murders of Griffis, Breem and Peter are extremely graphic and convey a sense that the men died unaware of a threat (despite having an Aboriginal prisoner) as: 'Had danger been apprehended, it was a very badly chosen spot ... an armed party, prepared for an attack, would have to fight at a disadvantage in such a position, for it would have to charge up the hill or enter into the mangroves' (CSO 3679/1886, Sholl to Colonial Secretary, 18 February 1868). The colonial public, informed through uncritical newspapers, received no description of the murdered bodies of Yaburara people. There was no questioning of the absence of any real warrant justifying execution or for the capture of the identified perpetrators, how bullets had torn their flesh, how they may have drowned or died later of their injuries, the demographics of those shot while trying to flee, or what became of their bodies.

In conclusion, Yaburara life in the islands of Murujuga was redefined in the course of the nineteenth century, as Europeans, Asians and other Aboriginal people were the primary occupants in the archipelago, at least until the pearling industry moved on. Today, some of the myths about Aboriginal life, such as that people did not live in the islands, can be discarded; people actively lived in the islands and were an important 'salt water' people. The impact of the grim realities of the colonial world, however, remain a stark fault line, and a legacy for our contemporary communities to continually recognise.

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