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Plural Australia:

Aboriginal and Asian Labour
in
Tropical White Australia, Darwin, 1911-1940

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree

Doctor of Philosophy
from
University of Wollongong

by

Julia Martínez, BA Dip Ed (Melb), BA Hons (Woll)

History and Politics Program
1999

To the best of my knowledge and belief, the work presented in this thesis is original, except as acknowledged in the text. The material has not been submitted in whole or in part for a degree at this or any other university.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis questions the dominance of White Australia as a narrative of Australian history by highlighting opposition to the policy and its vision of a pure white nation. It considers the need for a new paradigm, that of Plural Australia, to more adequately frame the experiences of Australia's past and to acknowledge continued ethnic heterogeneity within the nation. A northern, tropical perspective on Australian history undermines the traditional narrative of British colonisation and the supposedly unanimous desire to maintain a White Australia. Darwin was established as a mixed tropical colony and maintained its multi-ethnic society right throughout the White Australia period.

White Australia as a political and ideological principle has always been problematic. During the period up until 1940, the debate continued over the inclusion or exclusion of Australia's 'coloured' population within the nation, particularly in regard to Aboriginal and Asian workers. White Australia may have viewed these groups as potential competition to white workers, and as a threat to 'racial' purity, but this remained a contested issue. Colonial attitudes, which favoured 'cheap coloured' labour were retained. Internationalists, in contrast, preferred to include 'coloured' workers within the workforce and the community as equal members. Even staunch advocates of White Australia came to question the exclusion of 'coloured' residents from their community. This thesis argues that the primary issue for Australian nationalists was to create a unified and harmonious nation. It had been imagined that this would be achieved only with a 'racially' homogeneous population. But the experience of Darwin suggests that it was possible for a new kind of plural society to develop even under White Australia. The degree to which various ethnic groups were incorporated into the white working-class community differed, as is demonstrated in the case studies of Aboriginal servants and waterside workers, Japanese and 'Malay' pearling crews and Chinese workers. The character of Plural Australia was shaped, not simply by political, ideological or even economic considerations, but by the evolving responses of white Australians to their experience of living within a multi-ethnic community.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I express my thanks to all who offered their support and assistance during the long process of developing the thesis. In particular I would like to acknowledge the invaluable guidance of my two supervisors, Assoc. Prof. Andrew Wells and Assoc. Prof. Adrian Vickers at the University of Wollongong. Both provided the intellectual stimulus and practical advice which enabled me to complete the thesis. Also in the History and Politics program, I thank Dr. Tana Li for her friendship and intellectual support and Dr. Catriona Elder for her useful comments on chapter one. Dr. Regina Ganter, Griffith University and Dr. David Carment and Dr. Julie Wells, Northern Territory University provided ideas and encouragement during the initial formulation of my project. I thank also Dr. Christine Choo for sending copies of her work on Western Australia. I would also like to add my appreciation of Bernie Fitzpatrick for his time and effort in proof-reading.

The research undertaken for this thesis was made possible by funding from an Australian Postgraduate Award. I also acknowledge the financial support of the Northern Territory Government in granting me a History Award in 1996 for travel to Darwin and the North Australian Research Unit for providing accommodation in Darwin. I am also grateful to the Labour History and Asia Pacific research groups, now part of CAPSTRANS, in the Faculty of Arts, University of Wollongong, for providing further research funding.

There are countless librarians and archivists to whom I am indebted. In particular I thank the staff at the Australian Archives in Canberra and Darwin; the archivists at the Noel Butlin Archives at ANU; and at the manuscript section of the Australian National Library for their patience and help during my visits. I also thank Andrew Pitt from the Northern Territory Archives Services for his help on many occasions. Robyn Trentham and Judith Beach at the Northern Territory Library were helpful in providing photographs, as was Margaret Walters, Editorial Assistant of *Labour History*.

Finally to family, friends and fellow post-graduate students — and in particular my sister Elena — who encouraged me and endured the long process without complaint, I am grateful.

ABBREVIATIONS

AA	Australian Archives
AACTU	All-Australian Congress of Trade Unions
ACTU	Australian Council of Trade Unions
ALP	Australian Labor Party
ANU	Australian National University
ASSLH	Australian Society for the Study of Labour History
AWU	Australian Workers' Union
CPA	Communist Party of Australia
CPD	Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates
CPP	Commonwealth Parliamentary Papers
IWW	Industrial Workers of the World
KMT	Kuomintang
ML	Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW
NARU	North Australia Research Unit
NAIU	North Australian Industrial Union
NAWU	North Australian Workers' Union
NBAC, ANU	Noel Butlin Archives Centre, ANU
NLA	National Library of Australia
NT	Northern Territory
NTFL	Northern Territory Football League
NTU	Northern Territory University
NTWU	Northern Territory Workers' Union
NTAS	Northern Territory Archives Service
OBU	One Big Union
PPTU	Pan-Pacific Trade Union
VSP	Victorian Socialist Party
WWF	Waterside Workers' Federation

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Introduction

In this thesis, I examine the construction of 'White Australia' as an expression of national identity, problematising its dominant status in historical narratives. In order to revise accepted notions of White Australia, I have re-examined the national debate, firstly in the light of broader political ideology, and secondly in its application at a local community level, focusing on the tropical town of Darwin in the Northern Territory. In using the term 'White Australia', I am not simply referring to the White Australia policy as it was enacted in the *Immigration Restriction Act* of 1901. Immigration policy and international relations are often taken to be at the heart of contemporary debate over White Australia. I would argue that questions of internal social organisation, and the administration of Australia's remaining 'coloured' population, were by far the most contentious issues.

Public debate from 1901 to 1940 continued to focus on 'cheap coloured' labour versus white union labour, and on questions of segregation and integration of the 'coloured' population. In the case of Darwin, that debate centred on the employment of 'coloured' labour, a term which referred primarily to workers of Aboriginal and Asian descent.¹

It is too often assumed that the exclusionary policy of White Australia and its corresponding image of the Australian nation were unproblematic during the first half of the twentieth century.² Australia was imagined as a democratic nation, whose citizens were drawn from a white homogeneous population. There was no place for 'coloured' citizens, whether they be Aboriginal or Asian, in the new nation. But White Australia was not the unanimous expression of Australia's white population. Given that we now speak not of a single, essentialised national identity, but of multiple, fluid, identities, we cannot continue to represent White Australia as monolithic, assuming a unified voice of the white nation.

¹The term 'coloured', like the terms 'half-caste' and 'full-blood' are no longer acceptable, having derogatory connotations and being based on an outdated belief in 'race' as a scientific form of categorisation. I have kept these terms, only because they represent key organising concepts in the framing of White Australian policy.

²Robert Huttenback, for example, refers to 'White Australia' as 'The Classic Example' in his survey of all the British self-governing colonies in regards to 'immigration policy and the treatment of colored, non-indigenous inhabitants', in *Racism and Empire: White Settlers and Colored Immigrants in the British Self-Governing Colonies, 1830-1910*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1976, p. 279.

Historians of the nineteenth century, for whom White Australia marks the end of their period, simply assume that 1900 signals a uniform acceptance of White Australia. For sociologists of contemporary Australia, for whom White Australia provides a backdrop, the period is simply stereotyped and forgotten. Stephen Castles and Ellie Vasta, in discussing present day discourses of 'tolerance and diversity' describe present policies as 'a great step forward compared with our racist past.'³ This thesis concentrates on the period from 1900 to 1940 with the intention of disrupting this generalised image of a 'racist' past by demonstrating that discourses of 'tolerance and diversity' are not recent developments.

During the 1901 White Australia debate, it appeared that the implementation of immigration restriction had attracted widespread support from the voting public. One cannot, however, simply assume a uniform white population all thinking and acting in unison. In order to acknowledge the many perspectives within the white population, we would require access to more detailed studies than are currently available. As Sean Brawley pointed out, although the origins of White Australia have been debated, the actual period from 1901 to 1958, while the policy was in operation has been scarcely touched by historians. His own work, *White Peril*, focuses exclusively on the international relations aspect of the White Australia policy.⁴ Others, concentrating purely on immigration restriction, have tended to assume that the policy remained largely unquestioned during the pre-war period. Kenneth Rivett, for example, argued: 'The effectiveness with which the 'White Australia' policy was enforced can be seen in the decline in the number of Chinese in Australia from 1901 to 1947'.⁵ This emphasis on immigration figures, however, tells us little about the actual experiences of non-white residents, nor of white responses to their presence.

Markus acknowledges, however, that without further local studies, important issues of segregation and integration cannot be addressed.⁶ He highlights the difference between northern and southern Australia, arguing

³Stephen Castles and Ellie Vasta, 'Introduction: Multicultural or Multi-racist Australia?', in *The Teeth are Smiling: The Persistence of Racism in Multicultural Australia*, Ellie Vasta and Stephen Castles (eds.), Allen & Unwin, St Leonards, 1996, p. 5.

⁴Sean Brawley, *The White Peril, Foreign Relations and Asian Immigration to Australasia and North America 1919-1978*, UNSW Press, Sydney, 1995, p. 1.

⁵Kenneth Rivett (ed.), *Australia and the Non-White Migrant*, for the Immigration Reform Group, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, 1975.

⁶The same point is made in Raelene Frances, Bruce Scates & Ann McGrath, 'Broken Silences? Labour History and Aboriginal Workers', in Terry Irving (ed.), *Challenges to Labour History*, UNSW Press, Sydney, 1994, p. 203.

that 'in the north white Australia was a myth'.⁷ In choosing to focus on 'race' relations in Darwin, I hope to address these issues in a local context. The choice of a northern town is deliberate, in order to emphasise the inherent flaws in the White Australian vision of the nation.

White Australia is not a 'well-documented' subject, but a subject in need of more discussion. The idea of White Australia as a constructed ideal of national identity has not been considered in anything more than stereotypical terms. Where Richard White considers its construction, he reiterates the line that it 'attracted almost unanimous approval'.⁸ The experiences of Australia's 'coloured' residents during the period of White Australia have not been considered in sufficient detail — it is not even possible to discuss their relative acceptance or rejection during this period. Most studies have implied unanimous acceptance of the policy, alluding to protests only to dismiss them as insignificant. But as Frank Bongiorno has pointed out, 'for all the supposed agreement about the White Australia Policy, the question of race was on the agenda in this period'.⁹ There is much here to be considered and questioned.

As a means of undermining the hegemony of White Australia, in this thesis, I consider the contemporary voices of opposition to the policy. On the right were conservative liberals, whose ideology was linked to British colonial policy. They supported a 'racially' plural society on the grounds that it would provide cheap labour. This presupposed an inherent inequality of the 'races'. On the left, were internationalists whose anti-nationalist and anti-racist ideology placed them in opposition to nationalist White Australia. They supported a plural society in which all residents, regardless of 'race' would be treated equally. White Australia, therefore, was not a given, but a dialectic of 'race' relations, debated between opposing political parties and their adherents.¹⁰

If White Australia is considered to be an ideological position, based on a notion of 'racially' pure nationalism, then the opposing position might be described as that of Plural Australia. The fact that Plural Australia was imagined quite differently by the left and right-wings means that the term is necessarily ambiguous, but it will serve in this thesis to highlight an

⁷ Andrew Markus, *Australian Race Relations, 1788-1993*, Allen & Unwin, St Leonards, 1994, p. 85.

⁸ Richard White, *Inventing Australia*, Allen & Unwin, St Leonards, 1981, p. 114.

⁹ Frank Bongiorno, 'Bernard O'Dowd and the 'Problem' of Race', in Robert Hood and Ray Markey (eds.), *Labour and Community, Proceedings of the Sixth National Conference of the ASSLH*, ASSLH, Illawarra Branch, Department of Economics, University of Wollongong, 1999, p. 32.

¹⁰ The historical construction of 'race' was intended to legitimise the notion of discrete categories of people thereby sustaining discriminatory laws and social practices. See Christopher Fyfe, 'Using Race as an Instrument of Policy: A Historical View', *Race and Class*, Volume 36, October-December 1994, no. 2, pp. 69-78.

important, and often overlooked, debate in Australian history. While I consider questions of national identity, I have primarily examined this debate as a labour historian, focusing on the inclusion and exclusion of 'coloured' workers within Darwin's working-class community.

The term White Australia refers not only to a national ideology, but to an imagined national population. For those who believed in the myth of Australia as 98 per cent British, the population of the Australian nation was imagined as white. The presence of 'coloured' residents was conveniently overlooked in the construction of national histories. But the goal of a pure white Australian population was never achieved. As Beverley Kingston has noted, at the turn of the century, even though the south-east corner of the continent appeared to be British, the north of Australia was clearly polyglot.¹¹ It is perhaps a sign of southern blindness that national histories tended to reflect the whiteness of the south, rather than the pluralism of the north? This thesis rejects that myth and asks how white Australians responded to the continued presence of 'coloured' residents within their imagined white nation.

The second part of this thesis is a history of Plural Australia, taking the multi-ethnic town of Darwin as a case study. In using the term 'Plural' I am merely emphasising the fact that White Australia, far from being homogeneous, was in fact multi-ethnic. The term Plural carries with it other connotations, which I do not necessarily wish to invoke, especially the suggestion that a plural society is a divided society. This was the formulation as presented by Furnivall in relation to the Dutch East Indies, but we cannot assume a direct correlation with the Australian experience. In this thesis I have attempted to outline something of the character of Plural Australia, describing it not so much as a site of 'racial' conflict and separation, as a site of negotiation and tentative integration.

Contrary to the pessimistic predictions of the White Australian advocates, the presence of a multi-ethnic population did not provoke 'racial' violence nor civil unrest. Taking the North Australian Workers' Union (NAWU) and their interactions with 'coloured' workers as the primary focus, I have considered how their relationships altered during the period from 1911 to 1940. Instead of ongoing antagonism, I found a nuanced debate over what constituted White Australian nationalism, and who might be included in the national community. The quality of pure 'whiteness' was

¹¹Beverley Kingston, *The Oxford History of Australia, Volume 3, 1860-1900, Glad Confident Morning*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1988, p. 141.

not an assumed prerequisite for citizenship, nor for union membership, though it remained central to the discussion of inclusion and exclusion.

The subject of 'race' relations in Darwin has been examined by several authors. Tony Austin and Andrew Markus have written on Aboriginal history, while Diana Giese, Timothy Jones and others have focused on Chinese history.¹² However, there has been no academic study of Darwin as a multi-ethnic community. In this thesis, therefore, I attempt to include all ethnic groups within the discussion, rather than singling out one or two. In previous studies, little attention has been paid to the question of 'coloured' workers in Darwin. The history of unionism in the Territory is fragmentary at best.¹³ Andrew Markus, writing in *Who Are our Enemies?* in 1978, alluded to communist, anti-racist influences in 1930s Darwin, but his important comments have not been further explored.¹⁴ By taking a labour history perspective on 'race' relations I hope to offer a more nuanced version of Darwin's 'race' relations, and one which will consider the dynamics of both race and class in determining the construction of community solidarity.

The majority of Northern Territory histories consider the implications of Darwin's unusual 'race' relations as nothing more than a curious anomaly within White Australian history or perhaps as a remnant of colonial times. I would argue, that a Darwin perspective on 'race' relations facilitates a re-examination of the construction of White Australia, questioning the basic assumptions of our national histories. It is only by taking the so-called periphery seriously that we can begin to question previous assumptions made in national histories. The story of the Australian tropics since colonial times does not fit into standard histories of Australia as a colony of British 'settlement', having had more in common with histories of South-East Asian tropical colonies. These contradictions

¹²Tony Austin, *I Can Picture the Old Home So Clearly, The Commonwealth and 'Half-caste' Youth in the Northern Territory, 1911-1939*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, 1993; Andrew Markus, *Governing Savages*, Allen & Unwin, St Leonards, 1990; Diana Giese, *Beyond Chinatown, Changing Perspectives on the Top End Chinese Experience*, National Library of Australia, Canberra, 1995; Timothy Jones, *The Chinese in the Northern Territory*, Northern Territory University Press, Darwin, 1990.

¹³F. A. Alcorta, 'The Origins of Trade Unionism in the Northern Territory', *Labour History*, no. 43, November 1982, pp. 32-5; Frank Alcorta, *Darwin Rebellion 1911-1919*, NT History Unit, Darwin, 1984; Julia Martinez, 'Racism' in the Northern Territory: The attitudes of Administrators, Pastoralists and Unionists to Aborigines employed in the Cattle Industry, during the Depression, 1928-1934, B.A. Honours thesis, Department of History and Politics, University of Wollongong, 1995. P. Donovan's history gives some details of unionist activity but his overt anti-unionist stance makes his work of little use for this thesis. See *At the Other End of Australia*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1984. Bernie Brian is currently writing his PhD thesis on unionism in the Northern Territory.

¹⁴Andrew Markus, 'Talka Longa Mouth: Aborigines and the Labour Movement, 1890-1970', in A. Cuthoys & A. Markus (eds.), *Who Are Our Enemies? Racism and the Australian Working Class*, Hale & Iremonger, Sydney, 1978, pp. 149-150.

should not simply be dismissed as a product of a strange north. How can we justify retaining a southern-centric view of history, having long since rejected racial and climatic determinism. The image of the south as the centre of the nation is inextricably linked to the belief, drawn from 'racial' theory, that civilisation 'naturally' occurred in the temperate regions which were more suited to the perpetuation of European culture. The Plural Australia of the tropical north, therefore, should be told as yet another story of Australia's past, not as a curious aside.

The choice of Darwin as a case study necessarily led to certain time parameters. The year 1911 marks the beginning of the federal administration of the Territory, and with it, the implementation of new White Australia legislation. The year 1940, with the onset of war, followed by the bombing and evacuation of Darwin, acts as an unavoidable conclusion to this particular narrative. The geographic choice of Darwin is significant for several reasons. In terms of methodology, I was attracted, not only by its multi-ethnic population, but also by the multiplicity of representations of that population in the union newspaper, the *Northern Standard*. Furthermore, as an administrative centre, Darwin was the subject of a range of government reports, the majority of which dealt with 'race' issues.

As a site of 'race' relations, Darwin provides a contrast to the 'frontier' experiences described in Ann McGrath's *Born in the Cattle*; Darwin was quite separate from the Northern Territory's inland cattle country.¹⁵ It was a tropical port with much in common with nearby South-East Asian ports. If there are Australian parallels, they are to be found in the two other pearling centres: Thursday Island in Queensland and Broome in Western Australia. These three towns represented the most ethnically diverse populations in Australia during the period of White Australia.

Thesis overview

In chapter one, I have addressed in detail some of the theoretical and methodological issues which are raised in the examination of White Australia as a national, historical construct. In addition, I have discussed the way in which labour history, with its emphasis on class difference and working experiences might shape our understandings of Australia's past. Chapter two provides a nineteenth century colonial context for the

¹⁵Ann McGrath, *'Born in the Cattle', Aborigines in Cattle Country*, Allen & Unwin, St Leonards, 1987.

discussion of 'coloured' labour in twentieth century White Australia. The rest of the thesis is divided into two main sections.

The first deals with the three primary political and conceptual positions taken by contemporary white Australians. The first, which is often portrayed as the only position, was that of the nationalist White Australian advocates. This stance was adopted by the right-wing of the labour movement and also by more conservative groups. The two following chapters consider their opponents: the 'colonials' who retained a sense of liberal *laissez-faire* ideology, with its emphasis on imported 'coloured' labour; and the internationalists, known after 1920 as the communists. Their position was inherently opposed to that of White Australia as they claimed to regard all workers as equal, regardless of 'race'. This section of the thesis takes a broader national and international perspective on these opposing ideologies, but at the same time traces these influences within the debates centred upon Darwin itself.

The second section of the thesis is more firmly grounded in the experiences of the local community of Darwin, employing four case studies to consider the place of 'coloured' workers, both in their relation to the NAWU, and as contingent members of Darwin's working-class community. Aboriginal servants, Japanese and Malay pearling crews, so-called 'half-caste' waterside workers and the much-maligned Chinese workers are considered. Their life stories are taken from oral histories, personal biographies, and the sporting and social columns of the *Northern Standard*. These are 'histories from below', but they are necessarily placed in the context of the restrictive legislation of White Australia, which impinged to varying degrees on the lives of all 'coloured' residents. These then, are the stories of Plural Australia, which were made possible only because of the presence of dissent and difference within the supposedly homogeneous White Australian nation.

This thesis focuses on the margins of White Australia, problematising its construction as a hegemonic symbol of national identity. Despite being an apparent anomaly, a peripheral aberration, the site of Darwin remained central to the discourse of White Australia. Darwin was a multi-ethnic society and therefore a site of contention, which was to be forcibly drawn into the imagined ideal of White Australia. The very presence of difference within the boundaries of the nation, threatening its homogeneity, acted as fuel for the continued debate over White Australia. In the confrontation with Plural Australia, however, it was by no means certain that White Australia emerged as the victor. The strength of Plural Australia as a public

discourse was surprisingly powerful. This thesis attempts to demonstrate the importance of Plural Australia as a conceptual paradigm, on the presumption that in order to understand White Australia we must necessarily engage with Plural Australia.

Chapter one

Constructing White Australia

This chapter considers the ways in which historians have constructed Australian 'race' relations by highlighting three broad approaches. The first was based on the nationalist narrative of White Australia. From the time of Federation to the early 1960s, nationalist historians constructed the history of White Australia as an integral part of the nation-making process. Even today, there are historians for whom this emphasis on monocultural history has salience. In the 1970s, with the dismantling of the White Australia policy, New Left historians sought to rewrite the history of White Australia, rejecting the comfortable and celebratory pasts of both conservative and radical historians. Prompted by the criticism of Humphrey McQueen, White Australia was no longer represented as a glorious endeavour, but as the product of white Australian racism. This racism, discussed in the 1978 publication *Who Are Our Enemies?*, was said to have found voice through the labour movement, whose 'racial' ideology was influenced by British imperialist culture.¹

More recently, a third approach has emerged, in which historians have questioned the New Left emphasis on endemic racism, calling for a more nuanced debate over issues of inclusion and exclusion, and the construction of national identity. This critique has been expressed in terms of 'postmodern' concerns over what is often described as the use of reductionist 'marxist' methodology. But while many have pointed to the need for more inclusive historical narratives, there is still a dearth of histories which address the needs of multicultural Australia and enable us to reflect on Australia's place in the world.

This new construction of 'race' relations is discussed in the context of this thesis as a history of Plural Australia. Using a pluralist paradigm, Australian history of the early twentieth century is re-constructed on the basis of a heterogeneous rather than homogeneous population. This

¹Humphrey McQueen, *A New Britannia: An Argument Concerning the Social Origins of Australian Radicalism and Nationalism*, Penguin, Ringwood, 1970; Verity Burgmann, 'Capital and Labour' in Ann Curthoys and Andrew Markus (eds.), *Who Are Our Enemies? Racism and the Australian Working Class*, Hale & Iremonger, Neutral Bay, 1978, pp. 20-34.

approach is developed in the context of a northern perspective on Australian history, in particular using Darwin as a case study. The study of Darwin demands a multi-ethnic, Asian-oriented alternative to the isolationist, homogeneous White Australian paradigm. More, particularly, I advocate the need for questions of 'race' to be addressed within labour history, with an emphasis on work and community experiences and class difference.² The narrative of 'cheap coloured labour', which dominated White Australian discourse, cannot be adequately examined without a complex understanding of the way in which notions of class and party politics are interwoven into the fabric of White Australian history.

Writing White Australia

The divide between the colonial period and the so-called national period was represented by nationalist historians as a positive step into modernity. Though still a colonised territory from an indigenous perspective, Australia was proclaimed a nation. According to the nationalist myth, the Commonwealth of Australia was created as an egalitarian, democratic, unified nation, populated by a vibrant people who retained the cultural heritage and supposed racial superiority of their British forebears. According to nationalist historians, the creation of a White Australia was widely accepted as the moral choice, and questioned only insofar as the removal of 'cheap coloured' labour might economically delay the nation's development.³

Eminent historian, W. K. Hancock, writing in 1930, spoke of the demoralising social effects of mixing 'races', and concluded that: 'Reasonable Australians are determined that their country shall not know these evils.'⁴ Echoing the conclusions of Myra Willard's *History of the White Australia Policy to 1920*, Hancock wrote:

What they fear is not physical conquest by another race, but rather the internal decomposition in their inheritance of free institutions, in their right to govern themselves and freely make their own destiny. But self-government, they know, becomes impossible when

²Raelene Frances, Bruce Scates & Ann McGrath, 'Broken Silences? Labour History and Aboriginal Workers', in Terry Irving (ed.), *Challenges to Labour History*, UNSW Press, Sydney, 1994, p. 192.

³This same myth is reiterated today by John Kane in 'Racialism and Democracy: The Legacy of White Australia', in Geoffrey Stokes (ed.), *The Politics of Identity in Australia*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1997, pp. 117-131.

⁴W. K. Hancock, *Australia*, The Jacaranda Press, Brisbane, 1961, p. 61.

the inhabitants of a country do not agree upon essentials. ... Every State must maintain its own *ethos*, and Australians understand that even a successful tyranny over Orientals would destroy the character of their own democracy.⁵

Thus the White Australia policy and the creation of a culturally homogeneous nation, was presented as essential for the development of a free democracy.⁶ Reprinted in 1961, Hancock's version of the White Australian past has remained largely unquestioned for most of this century.

With the White Australia policy firmly in place, many historians abandoned discussions of 'race', preferring to describe Australian history after Federation in terms of a harmonious and homogeneous society. The use of a monocultural, 'Anglo-Celtic' paradigm became the standard form of nationalist writing. In writing white histories, historians created a 'silence', whereby non-white memories were forgotten — erased from historical memory.

Given that the 1970s saw the advent of New Left criticism, and the official, bipartisan endorsement of multiculturalism, one might have presumed this would mark the end of white nationalist histories. But this was not the case. The continued emphasis on white history was an extension of previous nationalist constructions. Even those who focused on 'race', such as Yarwood and Knowling, writing in *Race Relations in Australia, A History*, in 1982, emphasised the notion that 'race' relations was predominantly a feature of colonial Australia. Their book deals almost exclusively with the nineteenth century. Only Chapter Ten, titled, 'A White Australia in Prospect, Colonies and Commonwealth 1890 to 1939', considers the White Australia period. Apart from an examination of the 1901 Immigration Restriction Act, they allow only a few pages in which to discuss 'race' relations for the whole period, amounting to six pages on Aboriginal policy and ten on Asians in Australia.⁷ Yarwood acknowledges that the 'space available is insufficient to do justice', but his tone is dismissive.⁸ He describes 'race' relations during this period as if they were insignificant, writing:

⁵Hancock, pp. 61-62; Myra Willard, *History of the White Australia Policy to 1920*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, 1923, pp. 195-209.

⁶I have chosen 'policy' instead of 'Policy' because the 'White Australia Policy' is a term which is specifically linked to immigration restriction, and I am taking a broader view of White Australia.

⁷A. T. Yarwood and M. J. Knowling, *Race Relations in Australia, A History*, Methuen, Melbourne, 1982, pp. 138-154.

⁸*Ibid.*, p. 248.

With the end of the Pacific war and the defeat of Japan, the urban-dwelling majority of Australians returned to a way of life untouched by racial tension or by the direct experience of racial discrimination. Such was the success of the 'White Australia' policy that few made contact with Aborigines or immigrant non-Europeans. That was twenty years before Aborigines began to move into the capital cities and long before the arrival of significant numbers of Asian people as students and settlers. In their daily lives, Australians had become one of the least racially conscious people in the world.⁹

Yarwood invokes a mythical white past without 'racial tension'. His work reinforces the White Australian myth which claimed that the calm of the White Australia period was a result of the creation of an homogeneous population. It was this notion which allowed John Ray, writing in *Racism, the Australian Experience*, to argue in defence of restricted Asian immigration, stating:

I advocate enlightened self-interest and an Australia not torn by racial tensions. At present I can walk alone at night through the streets of Sydney without fear. I would like to keep it that way.¹⁰

Verity Burgmann makes a similar criticism of Geoffrey Blainey's version of Australian history, which, she argues, 'leads the reader to believe that the White Australia Policy has prevented the occurrence of racial problems'.¹¹ It was Blainey who gave new life to this argument in 1984 and John Howard who brought that argument into the political arena in 1988.¹²

Historian Raymond Evans, writing in 1988, questioned the harmonious and homogenous view of White Australian history and

mainstream historiography which infers, by omission, that non-Anglo-Celtic ethnicity is not a significant issue in Australia until the problems of refugee migration, assimilation and multiculturalism

⁹*Ibid.*, p. 257.

¹⁰John Ray, 'In Defence of Australia's Policy Towards Non-White Immigration', in F. S. Stevens and Edward Wolfers (eds.), *Racism: The Australian Experience, A Study of Race Prejudice in Australia, Volume 3, Colonialism and After*, Second Edition, Australia and New Zealand Book Co., Sydney, 1977, p. 239.

¹¹Verity Burgmann, 'Writing Racism Out of History', *Arena*, no. 67, 1984, p. 82.

¹²Andrew Markus and M. C. Ricklefs (eds.), *Surrender Australia? Essays in the Study and Uses of History, Geoffrey Blainey and Asian Immigration*, George Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1985.

are negotiated after the [second] world war. If such a perspective remains unchallenged, then the ethnic background of some major players in this earlier drama is far too brusquely obscured.¹³

The White Australia period, therefore, was imagined as a discrete, homogeneous period of historical quiet, lying between the 'racially' torn periods of colonial Australia, on the one hand, and post-war Australia on the other.

The 'silence' in labour history

If one considers this issue in relation to labour history in particular, it becomes clear that the New Left criticism of the 'silence' had only limited impact on this discipline. Writing in 1990, Michael Quinlan and Constance Lever-Tracy, considered trade union responses to Asian workers from 1830 to 1988. Their analysis of the period from 1900 to 1945 assumed that White Australia had led to the homogenisation of the workforce. They were dismissive of the need for further study into the interaction between unionists and Asian workers during this period. Like Yarwood, they argue that

'racial' distinctions ceased to be part of most people's experiences in terms of social structuring of interpersonal relationships. Aboriginal employment remained relatively insignificant and isolated. Southern European immigrants encountered racist hostility. However, this was limited by their small numbers, restricted employment ... and a rapid tendency towards self-employment ... Asians were still to be found in pearling and restaurants but this was insufficient to arouse concern in terms of job competition.¹⁴

Their analysis rests on the dubious notion that economic competition led to expressions of racism and that competition would only have occurred in the event that large numbers of non-white workers were employed. In effect, they reiterate the logic of White Australian exclusionism, giving tacit support to the myth that 'racial' conflict was averted by its enforcement.

¹³Raymond Evans, *The Red Flag Riots: A Study of Intolerance*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1988, p. 6.

¹⁴Michael Quinlan and Constance Lever-Tracy, 'From Labor Market Exclusion to Industrial Solidarity: Australian Trade Union Responses to Asian Workers 1930-1988', Michael Easson (ed.), *Australia and Immigration: Able to Grow?*, Pluto Press, Sydney, 1990, p. 29.

Their description of Aboriginal labour as 'insignificant' in this period, is patently incorrect, as was demonstrated in Ann McGrath's *'Born in the Cattle'*.¹⁵

In the essay, 'Broken Silences: Labour History and Aboriginal Workers', Raelene Frances, Bruce Scates and Ann McGrath have argued, as I do here, that if labour historians do not take Aboriginal labour history more seriously, 'labour history will remain, conceptually and analytically, trapped within that "great Australian silence"'. They argue that the 'best practitioners of (Aboriginal) labour history work outside the discipline', citing Deborah Bird Rose's *Hidden Histories* as an example. They also noted that at the 1993 conference for labour historians, 'no papers dealing with race, let alone Aboriginal work, were offered'.¹⁶ Ann Curthoys and Clive Moore similarly question the 'slow birth of Aboriginal labour history, given the early emphasis on racism by Humphrey McQueen and the New Left'.¹⁷

The more recent issue of *Labour History*, entitled *Aboriginal Workers*, challenges the notion of a white workforce, and provides a much needed insight into the scope of Aboriginal work. As Ann Curthoys and Clive Moore pointed out, the study of Aboriginal history has particular political significance as historians grapple with contemporary manifestations of Australia's on-going colonial history. Old stereotypes of 'dependent' Aborigines die hard despite the growing number of histories of Aboriginal workers in the twentieth century.¹⁸

In contrast to the continued concern regarding Aboriginal labour history, interest in the role of Asian workers in Australian history has waned since *Who Are Our Enemies?* was published. No-one has yet questioned the absence of a serious Asian-Australian labour history, despite the past and present importance of Asian workers in Australia.¹⁹ Previous histories have tended to concentrate on Chinese workers in the nineteenth century, but few attempts have been made to consider shifts in attitudes during the twentieth century.²⁰ As with Aboriginal labour history, the best

¹⁵Ann McGrath, *'Born in the Cattle'*, *Aborigines in Cattle Country*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1987.

¹⁶Frances, Scates and McGrath, 'Broken Silences?', pp. 207 and 193.

¹⁷Ann Curthoys and Clive Moore, 'Working for the White People: an Historiographic Essay on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Labour', *Aboriginal Workers*, special issue of *Labour History*, no. 69, November 1995, p. 7.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, p. 2.

¹⁹See Julia Martínez, 'Unionization and Indonesian Workers in 1930s Australia', in Robert Hood and Ray Markey (eds.), *Labour and Community, Proceedings of the Sixth National Conference of the ASSLH*, ASSLH, Illawarra Branch, Department of Economics, University of Wollongong, 1999, pp. 133-136.

²⁰Jan Ryan, 'Chinese Australian History', in Wayne Hudson and Geoffrey Bolton (eds.), *Changing Australian History, Creating Australia*, Allen & Unwin, St Leonards, 1997, pp. 71-8.

work is being done outside the field of labour history, for example, Regina Ganter's study of Japanese and 'Malay' pearling crews in the Torres Strait.

To illustrate the continuing 'silence' in labour history consider the history of the waterside workers in Australia. The watersiders provide an ideal case study for research into the interplay of 'race' and 'class'. Internationalism in the early twentieth century was often focused on the waterfront. In the United States, there have been numerous studies of 'race' relations at ports such as New Orleans, San Francisco and Philadelphia.²¹ These studies are all concerned with the dynamics of multi-ethnic workers, particularly during the 1920s and 1930s. In Australia, by comparison, Margo Beasley's 1996 commissioned history of the Waterside Workers' Federation makes almost no reference to the ethnicity of workers in the 1930s.²² We are left to assume that all waterside workers in that period were white in keeping with the White Australia policy. The presence of a multi-ethnic workforce is simply omitted, when most northern ports were clearly multi-ethnic. The problem is not necessarily that labour historians are blind to 'race', but that they do not expect to find 'coloured' workers during the White Australia period and this expectation shapes their historical enquiries.

Why is it that American historians should assume a multi-ethnic waterfront, while Australian historians assume a white waterfront? Our assumptions begin with the acceptance of White Australia as an all-pervasive force. General histories, such as Charlie Fox's *Working Australia*, tend to dismiss the early twentieth century as a time for white workers — he presents Japanese pearl divers as being the only exception to this rule.²³ The 'silence' therefore, is not only a product of conservative national histories, but the product of those marxist labour historians whose empirical research has been conducted in the absence of a 'racialised' framework. Taken as a whole, Australian labour history is still overwhelmingly eurocentric in its focus.

²¹Eric Arnesen, *Waterfront Workers of New Orleans: Race, Class, and Politics, 1863-1923*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana, 1991; Rick Halpern, 'Organized Labor, Black Workers, and the Twentieth Century South', in Melvyn Stokes and Rick Halpern (eds.), *Race and Class in the American South Since 1890*, Berg Publishers, Oxford, 1994; Peter Cole, *Shaping up and Shipping out: The Philadelphia Waterfront During and After the IWW years, 1913-1940*, Ph.D. Dissertation, Department of History, Georgetown University, 1997.

²²Margo Beasley, *Wharfies, A History of the Waterside Workers' Federation of Australia*, Halstead Press, Rushcutters Bay, 1996, pp. 76-103.

²³Charlie Fox, *Working Australia*, Allen & Unwin, North Sydney, 1991, p. 100.

A return to white history

Since 1996, there has been an increased resistance to immigration and multiculturalism in Australia, taking up historian Geoffrey Blainey's nostalgia for a homogeneous Australia.²⁴ This resistance to multiculturalism has sprung from a reluctance to shed the comfortable myth of a harmonious White Australian past. Despite the large body of celebratory white histories which continue to expound this myth, Prime Minister John Howard took it upon himself, to call for an end to the 'black armband' view of history.²⁵ He was particularly referring to the body of work on Aboriginal history in which historians had attempted to bring to light the brutal realities of frontier conflict, which had been absent from the pages of more traditional histories.

Writing in *The Politics of Identity in Australia*, John Kane echoes Howard's rejection of the 'black armband' view of history. His sympathetic reading of the White Australia policy begins with the comment that historians who have rejected our past as racist have denied us a national 'inheritance'. He writes:

Australians are no longer sure what to claim and what to disclaim in their inheritance. The radical rupture also has consequences when we consider the historical and rational foundations of multiculturalism. Its 'negative' foundation is the repudiation of racialism, but what are its positive bases?²⁶

Citing Elaine Thompson on Australian egalitarianism, he argues that the positive base is the ideological foundation of White Australia which contained principles of 'equality, representation, rights and justice'.²⁷ Kane argues that

it was a *virtue* of White Australia to recognise that a democratic polity can only be founded on a conviction of the essential *equality* of its citizens. The problem for colonial Australians was how to reconcile this conviction with their profound, if erroneous, belief in

²⁴Geoffrey Blainey, *All for Australia*, Methuen Haynes, Sydney, 1984, pp. 158-160.

²⁵Howard stated that he believes that 'the balance sheet of Australian history is a very generous and benign one', cited in Paul Newman, 'One Nation: Who's to Blame?', *Journal of Australian Studies*, no. 57, 1998, p. 6.

²⁶John Kane, 'Racialism and Democracy', p. 118.

²⁷Thompson in *Ibid.*, p. 119.

human inequality. The particular solution they arrived at was to argue that the preservation of democratic values required the strict maintenance of a racial homogeneity, in which whiteness was the governing principle.²⁸

Although Thompson is sharply critical of this solution, Kane defends their decision, writing that 'it is plainly absurd' to deny that 'white Australia was a democratic nation' as their decision to limit citizenship to particular groups was 'a different and prior question'.²⁹ I am unable to see how Kane can describe a nation as 'democratic' which denied citizenship to its indigenous peoples. Nor how a democracy which believed in the 'equality' of its citizens could have denied basic rights to certain citizens, particularly those of Asian descent. The flaw in Kane's logic is that he, like Yarwood, has uncritically absorbed the White Australian rhetoric, ignoring the fact that White Australian notions of democracy assumed a white population. As James Jupp has noted, however, the White Australian goal of a 'racially' homogenous population was never achieved.³⁰ Thus a democracy reserved for the white population could only create a divided and unequal Australian nation.

One would assume that a New Left-inspired oppositional approach, which highlights exploitation and discrimination, would sit uneasily with such a conservative view of the past. Ironically, Kane uses this very history of racism to defend his stance. Thompson argued that the White Australia policy was unnecessary as 'racial heterogeneity would not automatically have meant conflict'. But Kane disagrees, citing her account of 'the devastation wrought on indigenous peoples and on Chinese immigrants by racially motivated whites'.³¹ This, according to Kane, justifies the policy. His argument is that we should not judge the past when it 'could not, feasibly, have been otherwise'.³² On the subject of 'coolies', for example, he writes that:

Given the prevailing climate of racist opinion, the possibility of the formation of a permanent under-class defined by colour was

²⁸*Ibid.*

²⁹*Ibid.*

³⁰James Jupp, 'Immigration and National Identity: Multiculturalism', in Geoffrey Stokes (ed.), *The Politics of Identity in Australia*, p. 133. See also A. C. Palfreman, *The Administration of the White Australia Policy*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, 1967, p. 60, regarding naturalised and 'domiciled' non-Europeans.

³¹Kane, 'Racialism and Democracy', p. 120.

³²*Ibid.*

undoubtedly real. So was the danger, in hard and competitive times, of racial victimisation, rioting and physical violence such as had occurred on the goldfields a half-century before.³³

Kane is only able to contrast the imagined violence of a multi-ethnic society with a peaceful White Australia because of the plethora of oppositional histories which emphasise the strength of racist sentiment. It would appear that the notion of an all-pervasive racism, though developed by left-wing historians, can now be commandeered as a weapon for conservative politics.

The most recent work on this theme is Miriam Dixon's *The Imaginary Australia*. She rejects the demonisation of those she refers to as mainstream Anglo-Celtic Australians, arguing that such negativity 'damages political agency'. She argues that 'the Anglo-Celtic aspects of Australian life function as a vital cohesive centre for the whole culture'.³⁴ She warns of the danger of social fragmentation as the 'poly-ethnic nation begins to displace the ethnic nation'.³⁵ Again we see this assumption that multi-ethnic societies are necessarily unstable and therefore should be discouraged.

Though Dixon claims not to reject multicultural Australia, her nostalgia and 'mourning' for a lost 'Anglo-Celtic' past is clearly problematic.³⁶ In giving this thesis the title of 'Plural Australia' I am seeking to affirm our multi-ethnic past. Dixon, in contrast, would re-emphasise the dominance of an 'Anglo-Celtic' past. She argues that in pre-war times, the 'Anglo-Celtic core culture was nearly co-extensive with the whole culture',³⁷ citing the dubious statistical claim that 98 per cent of Australians were British.³⁸ In describing the broad streams of the Australian population Dixon recognises only three groups: indigenous, Anglo-Celtic and 'new ethnic'. Thus she confirms the notion of a predominantly homogeneous White Australian past, ignoring the 'old' histories of Asian Australians and other Europeans.³⁹

W. K. Hancock's assertion in 1930, that the creation of a democratic nation could be achieved only through the creation of a 'racially' and

³³*Ibid.*, p. 127.

³⁴Miriam Dixon, *The Imaginary Australia, Anglo-Celts and Identity – 1788 to the Present*, UNSW Press, Sydney, 1999, p. 2.

³⁵*Ibid.*, p. 3.

³⁶*Ibid.*, p. 11.

³⁷*Ibid.*, p. 35.

³⁸John Rickard points out that homogeneity was manufactured by defining all Australian-born citizens as 'British' regardless of ethnicity. *The Present and the Past, Australia, A Cultural History*, Second Edition, Longman, Harlow, 1996, p. 185.

³⁹Dixon, *The Imaginary Australian*, p. 18.

culturally homogeneous people remains largely unchallenged. Most historians have rejected the notion of 'racial' homogeneity, but in substituting 'ethnic' homogeneity, with an emphasis on cultural and civic values, writers such as Katherine Betts and Miriam Dixon assume a relationship between ethnicity and certain democratic values. As Ellie Vasta has argued, those who lean towards a classical humanist model of society, have argued for an 'homogeneous society which can be achieved through a multiculturalism that is as assimilationist ... as possible, as the best way of avoiding ethnic conflicts and violence'.⁴⁰ The cohesive quality of 'community spirit' and practice of 'democracy' are thought to be endangered by a multiculturalism which emphasises difference and fails to acknowledge the role of 'Anglo-Celtic' culture as the 'core culture'.⁴¹

Even Stephen Castles *et al*, writing in *Mistaken Identity* imagined a future of 'equality' and 'real communality' in a 'society based on the best elements of national Australian tradition' and 'the most important postulates of multiculturalism'. They suggest reasserting the Australian tradition of the 'fair go', that is, of social justice for all, arguing:

The image of Australia which should be brought back is that of the 'workingman's paradise', though the racist and sexist aspects of this ideal would need to be worked through and modified.⁴²

Even though they acknowledge that the 'fair go' was originally applied to the white male worker, they do not appear to question the basic assumption that egalitarianism was an inherent 'ethnic' quality of Australia's supposedly 'traditional' Anglo-Celtic culture.⁴³

Ghassan Hage, in *White Nation*, has described the 'discourse of Anglo decline' as one which

either passively mourns or actively calls for resistance against what it perceives as a state-sanctioned assault on the cultural forms that

⁴⁰Ellie Vasta, 'Dialectics of Domination: Racism and Multiculturalism' in *The Teeth are Smiling: The Persistence of Racism in Multicultural Australia*, Ellie Vasta and Stephen Castles (eds.), Allen & Unwin, St Leonards, 1996, p. 53.

⁴¹See also Katherine Betts, *The Great Divide: Immigration Politics in Australia*, Duffy & Snellgrove, Sydney, 1999.

⁴²Stephen Castles, Bill Cope, Mary Kalantzis and Michael Morrissey, *Mistaken Identity, Multiculturalism and the Demise of Nationalism in Australia*, Pluto Press, Sydney, Third Edition, 1992, p. 147.

⁴³See Anthony Milner's comments on the limited application of 'Asianisation' given the demands to retain the monocultural 'core' culture. 'Introduction', in Anthony Milner and Mary Quilty (eds.), *Australia in Asia, Communities of Thought*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1996, p. 20.

have their roots in the British colonisation of Australia.⁴⁴

In analysing the centrality of 'Anglo-Celtic' nationalism, Hage argues that the depiction of the mainstream culture as that of a 'liberal "tolerant" society', in combat against 'racist violence' masks the connection between the two positions. He points out that even those who see themselves as 'good' White nationalists, supporting a 'tolerant' form of multiculturalism, inhabit 'the same imaginary position of power within a nation imagined as "theirs"'.⁴⁵ He refers to the desire to maintain 'Anglo-Celtic' dominance as a fantasy of white supremacy. It is easy for those who feel personally attacked in this formulation to take a defensive stance, rejecting the implication that all white Australians are 'racist'. This should not prevent historians from recognising the prevalence of such fantasies in much of mainstream history.

New Left historians — writing against racism

New Left concern over questions of racism grew out of the political debate which surrounded the dismantling of the White Australia policy. Kenneth Rivett and the Immigration Reform Groups produced an important study of White Australian attitudes in 1962. David Johanson contributed a historical analysis of White Australian racism. He considered the continuing debate after 1901 over the use of 'coloured' labour in Australia. He pointed to pastoralist interest in retaining 'coloured' labour and to communist belief in the unity of the working-class and their rejection of White Australia.⁴⁶ Johanson identified several ingredients making up White Australian attitudes: 'fear of the depression of standards of living, awareness of social differences, alleged racial inferiority, political radicalism and nationalist fervour'. He was conscious, however, that the phenomenon was subject to historical shifts, writing:

It is safe to say that no one generation of Australians has produced, in sum, quite the same defence of the policy as any other. The arguments, the very content of the concept of 'White Australia', the

⁴⁴Ghassan Hage, *White Nation, Fantasies of White Supremacy in a Multicultural Society*, Pluto Press, Annandale, 1998, p. 179.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 78-9.

⁴⁶David Johanson, 'History of the White Australia Policy', in Kenneth Rivett (ed.), *Immigration: Control or Colour Bar?*, Melbourne University Press, 1962, pp. 22-24.

conditions which seemed to require it and to continue to justify it, have varied immensely.⁴⁷

The major turn against White Australia amongst historians was initiated by the publication of Humphrey McQueen's *A New Britannia* in 1970. In the field of labour history *Who Are Our Enemies? Racism and the Australian Working Class* addressed the important question of the role of the labour movement in promulgating racism towards Aboriginal, 'Kanaka' and Chinese workers. This New Left research took what has been described as an 'oppositional' approach, in that it tended to employ marxist categories of oppressors and oppressed, exploiters and exploited in order to analyse aspects of 'race' relations.⁴⁸ While it would not be possible to generalise about the work of Ann Curthoys, Andrew Markus and Verity Burgmann, all of whom contributed to the book, the focus was very much on white workers as agents of racism, and 'coloured' workers as victims.

A 1999 study on Italian workers in Port Adelaide by Desmond O'Connor demonstrates the dangers of writing 'race' into labour history without exercising due caution so as to avoid perpetuating 'racial' stereotypes. O'Connor describes the relationship between Italians and 'Anglo-Celtic' workers in the Depression years in terms of 'intense prejudice' and continued violent conflict between the two ethnic groups. His narrative tells of 'racial' violence in hard competitive times, supporting the view that multi-ethnic communities are prone to instability. Though his work is critical of the 'racial' stereotyping of Italian workers as knife-wielding 'scabs', the examples he has chosen do little to negate such stereotyping, but rather confirm the worst — that Italian immigration led to 'racial' conflict amongst the working-class.⁴⁹ But within O'Connor's narrative there are hints of another story. He mentions, in passing, that some Italians were members of the Australian Workers Union and the Communist Party of Australia.⁵⁰ The story of how these Italians came to be included in these bodies is not addressed. Are we to assume that these Italians learnt their sense of solidarity from the 'Anglo-Celtic' workers or that egalitarianism might have had an international following?

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, p. 27.

⁴⁸Bain Attwood, *The Making of the Aborigines*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1989, p. 135; Ann Curthoys and Andrew Markus (eds.), *Who Are Our Enemies?*

⁴⁹Desmond O'Connor, 'Declared Black: Confrontation between Italian and Anglo-Celtic Workers in Port Adelaide, 1928-1932', in David Palmer, Ross Shanahan and Martin Shanahan (eds.), *Australian Labour History Reconsidered*, Australian Humanities Press, Unley, 1999, pp. 191 and 202.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, pp. 194 and 202.

There has been much criticism of the New Left approach to writing about 'race', particularly in relation to what Reece has described as the 'cult of anti-racism'.⁵¹ Reece cautioned against excess, arguing that:

A study of Aboriginal history will both sensitize us to racism in contemporary society and will demonstrate its historical origins. [however] recitation of iniquity upon iniquity comes closer to polemics than to history and there is a danger of oversimplification.⁵²

A similar criticism was made of Andrew Markus' *Governing Savages*, on the administration of the Aboriginal peoples of the Northern Territory. In his review, John Mulvaney wrote that Markus'

sense of anger and disgust provides the book with feeling, but ... the worst examples tend to be treated as typical. There is little evidence here that there were any compassionate citizens domiciled in the Territory which seems unlikely.⁵³

Markus tends towards the belief that racism was both endemic and increasing in intensity during the White Australia period. In *Australian Race Relations*, he argues that the freedom of non-European residents 'contracted steadily' in the face of 'a growing racial arrogance, a ready acceptance of widening discriminatory practices, and an intolerance of diversity'.⁵⁴

Ironically, it was Markus who in 1978 insisted that the anti-racism of Australian unions under communist influence be acknowledged. He has not ignored cases of anti-racism or cooperation, but tends to regard these instances as anomalies in an otherwise gloomy picture.⁵⁵ There are three possible objections to this analysis: it assumes that the complexities of racism can be tallied up so as to produce a good or bad overall image; it tends to perpetuate the notion of 'racial' tension as inherent in mixed societies; and it is based on extant historical research, despite that fact that few

⁵¹R. Reece, 'The Aborigines in Australian Historiography', in J. Moses(ed.), *Historical Disciplines and Culture in Australasia*, St. Lucia, Queensland University Press, 1979, p. 262.

⁵²*Ibid.*, p. 263.

⁵³J. Mulvaney, 'Review of *Governing Savages*', in *Aboriginal History*, 1991, 15:2, p.165.

⁵⁴Andrew Markus, *Australian Race Relations, 1788-1993*, Allen & Unwin, St Leonards, 1994, p. 100.

⁵⁵Andrew Markus, 'Talka Longa Mouth: Aborigines and the Labour Movement, 1890-1970', in *Who Are Our Enemies?*, pp. 138-157; Markus, *Australian Race Relations*, p. viii.

historians have seriously addressed the phenomenon of anti-racism or anti-White Australian protest.

Writing in 'Broken Silences?', Raelene Frances, Bruce Scates and Ann McGrath question simplistic interpretations of past racism, querying why Markus' work of 1978, on the presence of early anti-racism in the union movement, has not been continued.⁵⁶ Only recently have historians such as Frank Bongiorno and Bob Boughton taken up the issue of anti-racism in the labour movement.⁵⁷ It is important, however, that in shifting away from an emphasis on racism, that we do not drift back in the direction of white celebratory histories. The complexities of inter-ethnic relations need to be addressed in such a way as to allow for a nuanced debate on questions of inclusion and exclusion without resorting to the simplistic dichotomy of racist and anti-racist.

Plural histories

If historians are to counteract the 'silence' produced in white histories, then clearly it is not sufficient to simply add in 'race' and racism. Histories written within a 'racialised' framework do have the potential to work against positive social change. This final section brings together ideas from the more recent developments in historical methodology in order to suggest a way forward in the writing of 'race' relations. My intention is to justify the project of writing a history of Plural Australia and to point to other works which might be mobilised as part of a new plural history. I have identified four main aims: to avoid simplistic accounts of racism; to create national histories suitable for a multicultural present; to place Australian history in an international context; and finally to demonstrate that labour history can facilitate in achieving these goals.

In choosing historical theories, I have been eclectic. The writing of new histories requires a return to empirical research in order to provide fresh evidence of 'race' relations that has been previously overlooked. It benefits also from an understanding of 'postmodern' notions of difference and of the politics of identity. This mode of perception enables us to question the reductionism of past histories and to allow for difference where

⁵⁶Frances, Scates and McGrath, 'Broken Silences?', pp. 201-202.

⁵⁷Frank Bongiorno, 'Bernard O'Dowd and the 'Problem' of Race', in Robert Hood and Ray Markey (eds.), *Labour and Community, Proceedings of the Sixth National Conference of the ASSLH*, ASSLH, Illawarra Branch, Department of Economics, University of Wollongong, 1999; Boughton, Bob, 'The Communist Party of Australia's Involvement in the Struggle for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples' Rights 1920-1970', in *Labour and Community*, pp. 37-46. See also Julia Martínez, 'Questioning "White Australia": Unionism and "Coloured" Labour, 1911-1937', *Labour History*, no. 76, May 1999, pp. 1-19.

previously we have relied on generalised meta-narrative. Similarly, taking a marxist approach, in which class difference and opposing political ideologies are examined, we can avoid categorising white and 'coloured' simply along 'racial' lines. In the analysis of class and ideology, however, the more recent methodology is of benefit, allowing historians to consider 'how language constructs rather than just reflects meaning, and the need to formulate more adequate accounts of agency and subjectivity'.⁵⁸

Beyond racism

This thesis is primarily concerned not merely with the presence of racism in Australia's past, but with the notion that a 'racially' heterogeneous past cannot be automatically linked with 'racial' conflict. This requires a reading of the past which emphasises cooperation, adaptation and integration. Ann McGrath's *Born in the Cattle* provides an example of a revisionist approach to oppositional history by presenting a more complex interplay of power between Europeans and Aborigines. Her work was not without its critics. Raelene Frances *et al* have argued that a 'realistic' view of Aboriginal agency is required, which does not attempt to romanticise the past nor deny the coerced nature of Aboriginal collaboration.⁵⁹ Tim Rowse criticised McGrath's work for its construction of a 'golden past' by its reliance on supposedly nostalgic Aboriginal memories.⁶⁰ Nevertheless, despite this, both acknowledge that her work represented an important breakthrough in the writing of Aboriginal history.⁶¹

This thesis attempts to follow McGrath's method for writing 'race' relations while taking into account the charges of excessive romanticism. In the case of multi-ethnic Darwin, discussed in this thesis, we have a perfect example of what White Australia might have looked like without immigration restriction. Racism continued to be voiced, as was the rhetoric of competition from 'cheap coloured' labour, but Darwin's multi-ethnic workforce survived the 'hard and competitive times' with little evidence of serious conflict. By taking a detailed micro-history approach, it is possible to highlight the negotiations between the white and 'coloured' population, constructing a dialectic of 'race' relations.

⁵⁸Joy Damousi, 'Multiple Political Identities', in W. Hudson and G. Bolton (eds.), *Changing Australian History*, p. 80.

⁵⁹Frances, Scates, & McGrath, 'Broken Silences?', p. 210.

⁶⁰Tim Rowse, 'Paternalism's Changing Reputation', in *Mankind*, Volume 18, no. 2, August. 1988, p. 62.

⁶¹Frances, Scates & McGrath, 'Broken Silences?', pp. 196-7.

It is not my intention to suppress evidence of 'racial' conflict, but rather to suggest that in the process of that conflict, strategies for cooperation and integration were developed. Furthermore, by considering the adaptations of White Australia to its multi-ethnic population, we can offer a past which has more resonance with today's multiculturalism, rather than accepting the present version of complete disruption between past and present. For those who have lived through the transition, this must surely appear as an artificial academic construction.

Neville Meaney in discussing the nation's White Australian past argued:

There can be no plausible Whig history of progress which can link that past with this present. There are no heroes who from the beginning of 'White Australia' fought against great odds and so brought us to this point, unless possibly they are members of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) or the Australian Communist Party, and it would be a brave soul indeed who argued that case.⁶²

But the writing of a Whig history of 'race' relations with left-wing heroes is not necessary. There is no need to point to a linear connection between the past and the present. If anything, the construction of a past of villainous racists is whiggish, in that it makes heroes of the bearers of multiculturalism, who prevailed despite the nation's long history of racism.

In considering the past in relation to the present, we need a realistic understanding of the present. As Anthony Milner has argued:

Multiculturalism might be best understood as the 'incorporation of diverse cultural attitudes into the dominant Anglo-Saxon mode of the society'. That is to say, the liberal (British) heritage retains a certain primary ...⁶³

With this understanding of multiculturalism, the supposedly 'radical' new policy appears closer to the formulation of White Australia as expressed by more 'tolerant' or liberal nationalists in the first half of the twentieth century.

⁶²Neville Meaney, 'The End of "White Australia" and Australia's Changing Perceptions of Asia, 1945-1990', *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, Volume 49, no. 2, November 1995, p. 171.

⁶³Milner, 'Introduction', p. 19.

Henry Reynolds in *This Whispering in our Hearts*, has gone in search of expressions of 'tolerance', writing a history of white humanitarian protest over the treatment of Aboriginal peoples. He concludes:

What the humanitarian story shows is that an alternative agenda was aired, a more humane course projected, was listened to, understood and then comprehensively rejected, often with derision.⁶⁴

Reynolds characterises humanitarian protestors as lonely people following 'thankless and unpopular paths'.⁶⁵ This thesis does not deliberately seek out self-confessed humanitarians. On a broader national level it emphasises both liberal and left-wing opposition to White Australia, both of which claimed an humanitarian agenda, adding a class dimension which Reynolds largely ignores. Within the multi-ethnic community of Darwin, the notion of an alternative, more inclusive agenda emerges in the contributions and debates of the local newspaper, the *Northern Standard*. Within this forum, the residents struggled with notions of 'racial hatred' and voiced their belief in a wider humanism. Protesters in Darwin were not necessarily 'unpopular' nor alone in their views. The debate was alive and continuing and, in many ways, it served to reshape their practice of 'race' relations in an immediate sense.

In shifting away from an oppositional paradigm, it is necessary to imagine individual communities as inherently plural, avoiding the bipolar dichotomies of white and 'coloured', or racist and anti-racist. Communities should be viewed as organic wholes and relationships between the ethnic groups analysed in such a way as to avoid assumptions of insuperable barriers dividing the society along 'racial' lines. Jan Ryan commented in *Creating Australia*, on the need for 'national histories' to be rewritten so as to include Chinese Australians, noting their absence from works such as Stuart Macintyre's *Oxford History of Australia*, Volume four, 1901-1942.⁶⁶ She argues that where they are included it is usually in 'token fragments' that 'retain familiar stereotypes of Chinese as a homogenous 'race', a detached entity, with a separate and alien identity.'⁶⁷ Ryan argues that the correction of eurocentric histories requires that historians go beyond 'the

⁶⁴Henry Reynolds, *This Whispering in our Hearts*, Allen & Unwin, St Leonards, 1998, p. 249.

⁶⁵*Ibid.*, p. 251.

⁶⁶See also Curthoys and Moore, 'Working for the White People', on the incorporation of Aboriginal history into national histories. p. 19.

⁶⁷Ryan, 'Chinese Australian History', p. 71.

Orientalist contrasts between us and them', and point, where appropriate, to shared experiences of a shared world'.⁶⁸ This desire to write shared histories of a Plural Australia is not unexpected given the need for multicultural Australians to reshape history so as to reflect their 'postmodern' perception of the nation.

Stories of Asian and Aboriginal workers are now mostly to be found in personal biographies and collections of oral histories. These modes of historical narrative are favoured by the individuals themselves as they many prefer to tell their own stories. In choosing to concentrate on Darwin, I am attempting to tap into that wealth of story-telling.⁶⁹ These individual voices and particular sites of interaction need to be drawn into a national context, for it is only in that forum that their stories will impinge upon the national histories. By focusing on the subjective experiences of individuals as they interacted within a multi-ethnic community, it is possible to develop a sense of the grassroots perspectives on White Australia. Combined with official narratives, media perceptions, and fictional accounts, these accounts can add to the richness of national histories.

Revisionist national pasts

Writing in *Creating Australia*, Wayne Hudson and Geoffrey Bolton argue that Australian history is something 'which changes and has to change as we create Australia'.⁷⁰ They favour an approach which admits 'multiple identities' focusing in particular on ethnic identities. They are critical of assumptions that multiculturalism is an invention of recent years, writing:

Consider the numerous Caledonian societies with their popular Burns nights, the German societies which flourished in South Australia ... the Russian Club which excited the Brisbane rioters of 1919, the organisations by which the Australian Chinese supported their members. But this ethnic richness has yet to inform adequately the general histories of our country.⁷¹

⁶⁸*Ibid.*, p. 77.

⁶⁹Frances, Scates and McGrath in 'Broken Silences?', suggested that labour historians 'listen to the history being recorded by Aboriginal people themselves', p. 194.

⁷⁰Wayne Hudson and Geoffrey Bolton, 'Creating Australia', in W. Hudson and G. Bolton (eds.), *Changing Australian History*, p. 3.

⁷¹*Ibid.*, p. 4.

Their comments point to a need to distinguish between official government policy and actual social conditions. White Australia may not have promoted multiculturalism but nevertheless ethnic cultural diversity existed and found expression.

It is somewhat ironic that after several decades of multiculturalism as an official policy, historians have not paid greater attention to the ethnic diversity of earlier decades. Thus far, to my knowledge, only Broome and Darwin have sought to promote (and celebrate) their plural past in this fashion. Both towns have constructed a 'multicultural' past as part of their public image for tourist consumption, presenting a sanitised, romantic vision of the past. Such a practice is not without its problems. According to Eric Hobsbawm, history is the raw material for nationalist ideologies and where there is no suitable past, it can always be invented. He warns against such politico-ideological abuse of history.⁷²

But the claims of northern Australia to a multi-ethnic — as opposed to multicultural — past are quite valid. These, along with parts of northern Queensland, provide the most obvious sites for constructing stories of Plural Australia. In writing about Plural Australia, however, we need to tread carefully. To highlight the apparent connection to our 'postmodern' multicultural present is clearly anachronistic. To highlight the connection to a supposedly exploitative and brutal colonial past is similarly anachronistic. The character of Plural Australia cannot be understood outside the framework of early twentieth-century preoccupations with the formation of the 'modern' nation. Conversely, an understanding of the 'nation' needs to take into account the plural character of its population.

David Goodman has written on the need to rethink national histories. He is concerned at the tendency of those engaged in Australian cultural studies to produce only critiques of nationalist histories, exposing the failure of historians to 'include all of those who make up the nation', without producing any new histories. Social historians, on the other hand, he argues, have ignored the national frame altogether, while they 'pursued local studies of the workings of gender and class and ethnicity'. Goodman argues that the result of 'postmodern' criticism is a notion of constructed identities, whose character was both fluid and fragile. Nations have been shown to be a 'site of difference and conflict as much as they are of

⁷²Hobsbawm, cited in Catherine Hall, 'Histories, Empires and the Post-Colonial Moment', in Iain Chambers & Lidia Curtis (eds.), *The Post-Colonial Question, Common Skies, Divided Horizons*, Routledge, London, 1996, p. 65.

similitude and harmony'.⁷³ But Goodman questions the usefulness of the current representations of the nation as diverse; with intellectuals producing 'a list of many different things, none of which is to be privileged above the others.'⁷⁴ He writes:

How will the new pluralised imagination work in the telling of something as complex as a history? Who is writing the new postmodern histories — the ones which constantly exhort us/enable us to imagine the story from other points of view? Which go beyond cataloguing diversity to imagining difference? Which are radically self-conscious about the issue of whose story it is that is being told, about the multiple relations between stories of the past and lives in the present? ... Which depict both the continuities and placedness of the indigenous populations and the shifting aesthetics of the 'migrant dreamings' of Australia, without making one seem to negate or diminish the other? Which admit to the existence of the two sexes and their differences? Which have a politicised but also cultural sense of the relations of the colonial Australians to the empire which abandoned them here? There is a great desire for such histories in Australia now.⁷⁵

Phrased in such a way, the task of writing new histories seems daunting. But the old notion of grand national histories cannot be revived. The sheer complexity of our postmodern perceptions of the nation renders the task impossible and undesirable. Nevertheless, new histories must be written, if only because criticism has not been sufficient to challenge old ideas. A better alternative must be offered, even if that alternative can only attempt to answer some of the demands made by Goodman.

For British sociologist, Catherine Hall, concerned with the re-writing of European history, the search for new inclusive myths to suit a 'New Europe' is presented as a process of drawing out suppressed memories and destabilizing notions of empire.⁷⁶ For the historian, there is a certain freedom to be gained from this perspective. It allows us to construct a version of a past which remembers difference and undermines the certainties of imperialist or nationalist meta-narratives.

⁷³David Goodman, 'Australian Identity, Postmodernism and History', in Livio Dobrez (ed.), *Identifying Australia in Postmodern Times*, Bibliotech, ANU, Canberra, 1994, p. 48.

⁷⁴*Ibid.*, p. 51.

⁷⁵*Ibid.*, p. 53.

⁷⁶Hall, 'Histories, Empires and the Post-Colonial Moment', pp. 66-67.

The construction of an ethnically plural version of Australian history need not be expressed as yet another meta-narrative, but rather as one of the many possible readings of our past. The proposed task of this thesis sits rather well with Foucault's description of genealogy. He wrote:

The search for descent is not the erecting of foundations: on the contrary, it disturbs what was previously considered immobile; it fragments what was thought unified; it shows the heterogeneity of what was imagined consistent within itself.⁷⁷

Foucault argues, however, that 'Genealogy requires a knowledge of details and depends on a vast accumulation of source material'.⁷⁸ Borrowing from Nietzsche, he has suggested that these materials were not intended to 'capture the exact essence of things' but to highlight the 'vicissitudes of history'.⁷⁹ The genealogist sets out to study the 'numberless beginnings whose faint traces and hints of color are readily seen by an historical eye'.⁸⁰

Empirical research is useful, even for those engaged entirely in discourse analysis. There is a tacit assumption that all the texts of history are readily available for re-examination in a more sceptical 'postmodern' fashion, but there are many voices which are buried in texts that will never see the light of day unless we continue to search for them. One text may not be deemed to be any more 'truthful' than another, but some are examples of rare voices, of minority groups, speaking of different pasts and in this sense they are valuable.

Hayden White is critical of the 'neutral' historical narrative which purports to uncover 'real' or 'lived' stories which are 'displayed before the reader to have their truth recognized immediately and intuitively'.⁸¹ Importantly though, he does not deny the existence of facts as such, but argues that the historical narrative requires not only facts, but interpretation. It is the act of interpretation which allows historians to create a subjective historical narrative.⁸² Thus, Catherine Hall, who announces openly her preference for an 'inclusive' European past, is acknowledging

⁷⁷Michel Foucault, 'Nietzsche, Genealogy, History', *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice, Selected Essays and Interviews*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1977, p. 147.

⁷⁸*Ibid.*, p. 140.

⁷⁹*Ibid.*, pp. 142, 144.

⁸⁰*Ibid.*, p. 145.

⁸¹Hayden White, 'Historical Emplotment and the Problem of Truth', in Keith Jenkins (ed.), *The Postmodern History Reader*, Routledge, London, 1997, p. 392.

⁸²*Ibid.*, p. 394.

the subjectivity of history and at the same time giving us an indication of her particular interpretative framework.

In the sense that Hall hopes to compensate for past representations of empire, her method is aligned to Nietzsche's idea of history as an 'antidote'. According to Foucault, Nietzsche's historical sense deliberately retains a slanted perception, in order to prescribe the best antidote for 'lingering and poisonous traces'. Rejecting objectivity Foucault writes:

It is not given to discreet effacement before the objects it observes and does not submit itself to their processes; nor does it seek laws, since it gives equal weight to its own sight and to its objects.⁸³

Carlo Ginsberg is critical of this subjective history, pointing to the way in which French 'revisionists' have sought to rewrite the history of the Nazi persecution of the Jewish people.⁸⁴ In the hands of right-wing historians, a relativist position, which is seemingly devoid of 'factual' grounding, can be a dangerous tool. But as Foucault has noted, the invocation of objectivity and the notion that the 'facts' are incontrovertible, can similarly become a weapon for political purposes, all the more insidious as it allows the historian to disclaim their bias, and hide behind 'the evidence'.⁸⁵

Like Catherine Hall, I believe that multicultural Australia requires new myths of a more inclusive past, a past which recognises the presence of a multi-ethnic population and allows them space as active participants in national histories. As a result of the multicultural paradigm we 'imagine' — in the sense used by Benedict Anderson — the Australian nation as plural.⁸⁶ But despite the wealth of literature on multiculturalism, there has been no attempt to study pre-war Australia in a similar fashion. The inclusion of all ethnic groups within national histories is vital if we are to combat the resurgence in White Australian nationalism. According to British sociologist Robert Miles, 'melting pot' nation states, such as USA and France, have been consciously constructed from the 'diverse populations that migrated into these territories during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries'.⁸⁷ Referring to Britain, he cautions against the construction of the British as a 'unitary people', undiluted by immigration,

⁸³Foucault, 'Nietzsche, Genealogy, History', pp. 156-7.

⁸⁴Ginsberg cited in Saul Friedlander, 'Probing the limits of representation', in Keith Jenkins (ed.), *The Postmodern History Reader*, Routledge, London, 1997, p. 391.

⁸⁵Foucault, 'Nietzsche, Genealogy, History', p. 158.

⁸⁶Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*, Verso, London, 1983.

⁸⁷Robert Miles, *Racism after 'Race Relations'*, Routledge, London, 1993, p. 9.

arguing that it leads towards 'the conclusion that immigration is therefore necessarily undesirable' and presents resistance to immigration as 'natural' as people seek to protect supposedly 'timeless traditions'.⁸⁸

Australian historians rarely construct the story of the national past within a plural paradigm, preferring to concentrate on a single alternative ethnic group and their relationship to the dominant white population. Darwin, for example, had a population which was arguably more diverse than any town in Australia today. The population included at least nine different European nationalities, seven Asian nationalities and several distinct Aboriginal groups. The supposedly dominant 'Anglo-Celtic' population was a minority group.

Regina Ganter's *Pearl-Shellfish of Torres Strait* is one recent example of a study of Queensland 'race' relations which incorporates Asian, Aboriginal and European perspectives. Her 1999 workshop, 'Asians in Australian History', held at Griffith University, brought together a number of papers on northern Australia which emphasised this triangular relationship. Even the triangular paradigm, however, fails to adequately represent the diversity of past populations in that it continues to assume a uniform European entity as the dominant voice. In any case, the complex interconnections between the various 'racial' groups inevitably led to a degree of hybridisation which in turn blurred notions of distinct 'racial' groups.⁸⁹ To study two or three 'discrete' ethnic groups is to underestimate the complexity of multi-ethnic societies.

International connections — looking north to Asia

If we are to imagine Australia in an Asian context, a plural paradigm is vital. Anthony Milner argues Australia's colonial history should lead us to recognise that a commitment to Asia is not a new phenomenon. He points in particular to Australia's colonial trade with various Asian countries.⁹⁰ As they stand, the histories of Australia and the South-East Asian region though geographically close, are thought to be separate and disconnected. From the perspective of Asia, the spectre of White Australia presents a psychological barrier which cannot be easily overcome. Australia has suffered in reputation from its long period of isolation, and for this reason it struggles to connect to an Asia it once rejected. Milner cites Singapore

⁸⁸*Ibid.*, p. 10.

⁸⁹Re hybridisation in multicultural societies, see Ernesto Laclau, *Emancipations*, Verso, London, 1996, p. 65.

⁹⁰Milner, 'Introduction', p. 2.

government minister, George Yeo, as warning that 'no society can deny its history'.⁹¹ But as history is not fixed, we are able to alter its emphasis. The isolationist image might be softened somewhat if we could highlight the plurality of Australia's past and its continued connection to Asia throughout the so-called White Australia period. A Plural Australia would allow us to conceptualise Australian society within the same social framework as countries in South-East Asia, thus breaking down the artificial barrier which has been constructed across Australia's northern border. In drawing connections between Australia and China, Japan, the Philippines and the Dutch East Indies, this thesis constructs bridges across that border.

Writing from within a plural paradigm, one cannot help but draw comparisons between the history of the Dutch East Indies, for example, and northern Australia and in the process develop an entirely new sense of Australia's place in the region.⁹² Furnivall's notion of plural society, developed in the Dutch East Indies context can provide Australian historians with both an international perspective and a comparative theoretical framework.⁹³ While Australia's national policy emphasised a desire for an homogeneous population, intellectuals had little incentive to develop a sophisticated theoretical stance on social pluralism. It was not until post-war immigration that serious consideration was given to theories of social policy: assimilation, integration and multiculturalism. In the Dutch East Indies, however, the beginning of the twentieth century saw the implementation of the Ethical policy, and an attempt to theorise a way beyond pluralism towards integration of its diverse population.⁹⁴ According to van Doorn, the notion of pluralisation as presented by Furnivall refers not merely to ethnic diversity but to an increasing segmentation or segregation. Thus pluralisation is contrasted with the integrated society expressed in Indisch nationalism, a nationalism which argued for equal rights for all citizens regardless of their ethnicity.⁹⁵ In choosing to use the term Plural Australia, I am not suggesting that the Dutch East Indies model

⁹¹*Ibid.*, p. 21.

⁹²See for example J. J. A. van Doorn, 'A Divided Society: Segmentation and Mediation in Late-Colonial Indonesia', in *Papers of the Dutch-Indonesian Historical Conference*, Bureau of Indonesian Studies, Leiden, 1982, pp. 128-171.

⁹³J. S. Furnivall, *Netherlands India, A Study of Plural Economy*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1944, pp. 446-469; Christine Inglis similarly described Darwin as a 'plural society' in *The Darwin Chinese: a study of assimilation*, MA thesis, ANU, 1967, p. 45.

⁹⁴Van Doorn, 'A Divided Society', p. 152.

⁹⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 131-132.

can be directly overlaid onto the Australian experience. By designating Australia a plural society I merely wish to open up the field for debate.⁹⁶

As a plural port town, Darwin becomes connected with similar port towns in every continent. The artificial barriers constructed by imagining some nations as white 'settler' nations is removed. Rhoads Murphey imagines these connections in terms of the sea, which links together port cities whose populations he describes as 'cosmopolitan' or 'hybrid':

A port city is open to the world, or at least to a varied section of it. In it races, cultures, and ideas as well as goods from a variety of places jostle, mix and enrich each other and the life of the city. The smell of the sea and the harbour, still to be found ... in all of them, like the sound of boat whistles or the moving tides, is a symbol of their multiple links with a wider world ...⁹⁷

It is perhaps this quality of openness which translates into particular forms of 'race' relations.

A northern perspective

The realignment of Australian history towards an Asian perspective is best done by subverting the traditional southern-centred perspective of the Australian nation and looking northwards to Australia's tropical port towns. In the first half of the twentieth century, nationalist histories of Australia represented the heart of the Australian nation as residing in the states of Victoria and New South Wales. The northern regions, Queensland, Western Australia and the Northern Territory were regarded as frontier lands with an ambiguous claim to inclusion in the future White Australian nation. This construction of north and south came from a racially-based notion of climatic determinism.

Only the southern, temperate regions were deemed to be truly suitable for the perpetuation of White Australia, while the northern, tropical climates were thought to be suited to Asian populations.⁹⁸ According to David Walker in *Anxious Nation*:

⁹⁶Note that G. Evans also used the term 'Plural' to describe Thursday Island. See G. Evans, Thursday Island, 1878-1911, a Plural Society, BA (Hons), University of Queensland, 1972.

⁹⁷Rhoads Murphey, 'On the Evolution of the Port City', in Frank Broeze (ed.), *Brides of the Sea, Port Cities of Asia from the 16th-20th Centuries*, New South Wales University Press, Kensington, 1989, p. 225.

⁹⁸David Walker, *Anxious Nation, Australia and the Rise of Asia 1850-1938*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1999, p. 123.

Nineteenth century race theorists invariably drew sharp, unforgiving distinctions between races from cold as against tropical regions. They argued that in the tropics abundance discouraged effort. Where nature was so generous, the individual did not have to plan for the future. ... Cold climates were said to hone and sharpen talents by creating conditions of privation that demanded planning for scarcity.⁹⁹

What is surprising, however, is that present histories continue to echo these north-south assumptions. There is nothing 'natural' about the peripheral status of Darwin as opposed to the central status of Melbourne, for example, and yet the supposed dominance of White Australia in our national history relies on precisely this dichotomy. Wayne Hudson and Geoffrey Bolton make a similar comment, writing: 'As scholars working in Queensland and Western Australia we are unconvinced by accounts centred almost exclusively on the concerns of the Sydney-Canberra-Melbourne axis.'¹⁰⁰

While it was the study of northern history that prompted me to take on the term Plural Australia, it would be wrong to suggest that term is particular or peculiar to the tropics. Tropical Australia was clearly the heart of Plural Australia, in that it retained a predominantly 'coloured' population. But the population in the southern regions of Australia was also multi-ethnic, despite having a majority white population. Of course the notion of a Plural Australia does not simply refer to the fact of multi-ethnicity. It also refers to a model of nationhood, based not on 'racial' homogeneity but on plurality. Opposition to policy of White Australia, emanating from both colonials and internationalists can be loosely designated as supporting a Plural Australia. Political ideology to the left and right of White Australian nationalism favoured a closer integration with Australia's non-white population. These opinions were just as likely to emanate from the southern regions as from the north.

New labour history?

The writing of Plural Australia is not possible unless historians take seriously the relationship between 'race' and class. In recent years, the majority of studies on 'race' have ignored issues of class, with many

⁹⁹*Ibid.*, p. 143.

¹⁰⁰Hudson and Bolton, 'Creating Australia', p. 6.

deliberately avoiding the field of labour history as an outmoded form of historical analysis. But 'postmodern' criticism should not lead us to abandon class analysis altogether. Class, like race, was a central organising factor in pre-war Australia. The discourse of class is so deeply embedded in any discussion of Australian history that it would be impossible to remove it without engaging in conscious editing.

These two historical forms are often presented as antithetical and yet there is some overlap.¹⁰¹ The 'postmodern' field of 'race' relations is preoccupied with what might be termed 'race' representations, taking its method from discourse analysis and constructions of the 'other'. This body of work rarely touches on the class issues which are central to labour history. Labour historians, on the other hand, while retaining class as a central organising concept, are now more likely to acknowledge its contingency and to examine representations of class difference in a way which moves beyond an orthodox marxist approach.¹⁰²

In Britain and America, the study of 'race' in labour history appears to have survived the 'postmodern' revolution in history writing. In July 1997, a conference entitled, 'Racializing Class, Classifying Race — A Conference on Labour and Difference in Africa, USA, and Britain' was held at Oxford. The themes of 'race' and 'class' were examined both in a theoretical context and through papers covering issues such as gender, migration, and violence, as well as through case studies of multi-ethnic workers in the waterfront and mining industries.

The level of debate at this conference spoke of a large and complex body of research dealing specifically with the theme of 'race' in labour history. There was little sense of the crisis of confidence which assails some labour historians in Australia.¹⁰³ Most of the work included 'postmodern' notions of identity construction and difference, though these were blended with marxist notions of class struggle and exploitation. E. P. Thompson's cultural and social interpretations of 'class' were the starting point for many papers, allowing the study of 'class' to move beyond the economic, a necessary shift when considering 'race' relations in labour history.

¹⁰¹Verity Burgmann, 'The Revival of Labour History', in David Palmer, Ross Shanahan and Martin Shanahan (eds.), *Australian Labour History Reconsidered*, pp. 244.

¹⁰²Kenan Malik, 'Universalism and Difference: Race and the Postmodernists', *Race and Class*, Volume 37, January-March 1996, no. 3, p. 9.

¹⁰³Verity Burgmann, 'The Point of Change and the Health of Labour History', *Labour History*, no. 76, May 1999, pp. 171-180. Raelene Frances and Bruce Scates took issue with Burgmann's earlier paper 'The Strange Death of Labour History', in Bob Carr et al., *Bede Nairn and Labor History*, Leichhardt, 1991, pp. 69-82, arguing that the broader scope of labour history, which includes race and gender has produced a more innovative discipline. 'Is Labour History Dead?', *Australian Historical Studies*, Volume 25, April 1993, no. 100, pp. 470-481.

In the near future perhaps this important stream of labour history will gain equal prominence in Australia. Terry Irving and Sean Scalmer have argued that labour history, despite having reinvented itself over the decades, retains at its core, a social and political purpose, being 'written to advance and enrich a changing labour movement'.¹⁰⁴ I would argue that labour history should cast its scope more widely, to incorporate the concerns of 'race' relations, and to advance our understanding of issues of national and international importance. In doing so, it will address one of the most important debates of this century.

¹⁰⁴Terry Irving and Sean Scalmer, 'Labour Historians as Labour Intellectuals: Generations and Crises', in Robert Hood and Ray Markey (eds.), *Labour and Community*, pp. 103-105.

Chapter two

Colonial labour policy in the tropics

This chapter considers the discourse of 'race' in the construction of Australia's colonial identity, taking a northern revisionist perspective. It is intended to provide a nineteenth-century historical background to the White Australian debate over 'coloured' labour. The first section looks at attempts to categorise Australia's colonial experience as that of a 'British settlement' colony. The term 'settlement' is no longer acceptable, as we now acknowledge the British invasion of the Australian continent.¹ Even within the settlement paradigm, though, we must question whether tropical Australia was ever regarded as a potential site for the recreation of British society. Colonial categories are considered in the light of the perceived correlation between climatic conditions and the 'racial' composition of colonies. The second section provides a brief colonial history of tropical Northern Territory, emphasising the colony's reliance on 'coloured' labour. White colonial attitudes towards Aboriginal, Malay, Japanese and Chinese workers are examined, demonstrating the tension between those who favoured a 'mixed race' colony and those who aspired to the ideal of a British settler colony.

A settlement colony?

Australia's colonial past has been traditionally explained in terms of the creation of a British settlement colony, thus emphasising the continuity between the white colonial past and the White Australian nation. But this description is scarcely appropriate in describing the multi-ethnic colonial past of the Northern Territory. The problem lies in the tendency to regard colonial Australia as a uniform entity. It is too easy to forget, as Beverley Kingston reminds us, that the Australian colonies 'were six separate entities

¹ According to Henry Reynolds: 'Unease about the morality of settlement has been apparent throughout the two centuries of European occupation of the Australian continent'. *This Whispering in Our Hearts*, Allen & Unwin, St Leonards, 1998, p. xiv. See also Stuart Macintyre, *A Colonial Liberalism, Lost World of Three Victorian Visionaries*, Oxford University Press, South Melbourne, 1991, p. 211.

with six different histories.² Donald Denoon, in his study of settler capitalism in the southern hemisphere included Australia together with New Zealand, South Africa, Uruguay, Argentina and Chile in this category, describing these colonies as inherently different from tropical colonies of occupation.³ Denoon suggests that settler societies were established in temperate climates, in regions which were 'sparsely occupied'.⁴ Even if we allow this problematic representation of the settler paradigm, the notion that Australia can be regarded as separate from the tropics ignores the fact that the northern half of the continent lies within this region. Is it feasible to represent this large portion of the continent as a mere exception to an otherwise typical example of British settlement?

D. K. Fieldhouse, like Denoon, highlights the supposed difference between Australia and the tropical colonies in Asia, writing:

South Africa and Australasia maintained the first traditions of European expansion, as true reproductions of European society. They had nothing in common with the majority of new tropical colonies of occupation in Africa, Asia, and the Pacific.⁵

This artificial distinction between colonies of settlement and colonies of occupation serves to construct an invisible barrier between Australia and its northern neighbours in South East Asia. By way of explanation, Fieldhouse notes that the colony of New South Wales though not originally intended as a 'pure' settlement colony, nevertheless came to reproduce British society.⁶ How is it that southern history is privileged to the extent that New South Wales serves as the representative of the entire Australian continent? The case study of colonial Northern Territory outlined in this chapter is far from having 'nothing in common' with the tropical colonies of South East Asia.

Australia's differing colonial experiences necessarily became blurred as colonies federated into the nation. The dilemma for nationalist historians was that the preferred early history of the nation was that which emphasised

²Beverley Kingston, *The Oxford History of Australia, Volume 3, 1860-1900, Glad Confident Morning*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1988, p. 107.

³Donald Denoon, *Settler Capitalism, The Dynamics of Dependent Development in the Southern Hemisphere*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1983, p. 2.

⁴This categorisation is clearly problematic; all colonies were colonies of occupation. The fiction of peaceful 'settlement' colonies is difficult to sustain in the face of revisionist criticism. In the case of South Africa, the political demise of a 'white' dominated government has highlighted the fragility of the 'settler' paradigm. Denoon, *Settler Capitalism*, p. 3.

⁵D. K. Fieldhouse, *The Colonial Empires, A Comparative Survey from the Eighteenth Century*, Macmillan Educational Ltd., London, 1966, pp. 250-251.

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 78.

European settlement rather than the exploitation of 'coloured' labour. In the cases of the United States and Australia, national histories were skewed towards the temperate regions.⁷ This north-south division within Australian history is rarely considered when national histories generalise about British settlement. Where northern perspectives are included, the north is portrayed as being outside the mainstream Australian experience. The nation is perceived as being centred in the south, perpetuating eurocentric notions which divided the colonial world into dichotomies of temperate and tropical, white and 'coloured', civilised and savage. These were the images on which White Australia rested, but today there is no reason for this north-south paradigm to go unquestioned. White Australian historians deliberately constructed a past which emphasised British settlement and helped to reinforce Australia's separateness and distinctiveness from its northern neighbours. Neither of these objectives is justified today.

In searching for alternative colonial models, it is useful to consider D. K. Fieldhouse's three categories of settlement colonies, those being 'pure', 'mixed' and 'plantation'. 'Pure' colonies, states Fieldhouse, were those such as New England, in the northern region of North America. These colonies, like New South Wales, reproduced British society, after having 'pushed' the indigenous inhabitants to the margins.⁸ Plantation colonies in contrast relied on imported labour, such as those in the south of North America, which were inhabited by relatively few Europeans and a majority of imported African slaves.⁹ According to Robert Miles, where the climate was tropical, Europeans made use of the cheap 'coloured' labour, claiming that 'natives', unlike Europeans, were 'specifically suited to work under tropical conditions'.¹⁰

Colonies of occupation in Asia were similarly ruled by a small number of Europeans. Fieldhouse argues that 'geographic or demographic conditions made full settlement unattractive'.¹¹ Another similarity between plantation and occupation colonies was that both focused on commercial production rather than settlement. If settlement was not the primary goal of plantation colonies, one must question why Brazil, southern North America

⁷See also Sir William McMillan, leader of the Opposition in the lead up to Federation, arguing that only one half of Australia was suitable for British people. Cited in Gizen-No-Teki, *Colorphobia, An Exposure of the 'White Australia' Fallacy*, R.T. Kelly, Sydney, 1903, pp. 77-8.

⁸Again this term 'pushed' is used as a euphemism for the violent reality of colonial conquest. At the other end of the spectrum Andrew Markus, in describing the North American experience uses the term 'exterminated'. *Australian Race Relations, 1788-1993*, Allen & Unwin, St Leonards, 1994, p. 18.

⁹Fieldhouse, *The Colonial Empires*, p. 58.

¹⁰Robert Miles, *Racism*, Routledge, London, 1989, p.30.

¹¹Fieldhouse, *The Colonial Empires*, p. 12.

and Queensland were categorised as settlement colonies in the first place. The distinction lay not in the presence of a large number of settlers, but in the perceived absence of a large indigenous population. The reliance of plantation colonies on imported labour relegated the indigenous population to the background, thus allowing the construction of the myth of settlement rather than occupation or conquest.

The third category described by Fieldhouse, is that of 'mixed' colonies. In the 'mixed' Spanish colonies of Mexico and Peru, a 'substantial minority of white settlers created societies as similar to that of Old Spain as alien conditions allowed, controlling and, as far as possible absorbing, the indigenous population'.¹² Whereas 'plantation' colonies relied on imported labour, 'mixed' colonies were based on an indigenous working population, dominated by a minority of local-born whites or *creoles* and 'half-castes' or *mestizos*. These societies were similar in character to those in parts of nineteenth-century Africa.¹³ Fieldhouse distinguishes between these colonies and those of occupation, such as the Philippines in terms of indigenous policy. In the 'mixed' colony the indigenous population were controlled and absorbed, whereas in colonies of occupation they were 'loosely supervised'.¹⁴ In practice, Fieldhouse conflates the two categories, describing Java alternatively as a colony of occupation and later as a 'mixed' society.¹⁵

'Mixed' colonies were also characterised by the extent to which the indigenous population was assimilated into the European society, both through intermarriage and through cultural assimilation. Fieldhouse, argues that in most cases, humanitarian principles, which favoured equality of treatment of indigenous inhabitants, soon gave way to enslavement as white residents claimed indigenous lands and labour for their own uses.¹⁶ Thus the three colonial categories of 'mixed', 'plantation' and 'occupation' all involved the negotiation of relationships based on a small white population and a larger body of non-Europeans whose primary function in colonial eyes was to provide cheap labour.

Aspects of all three colonial categories are useful in the examination of colonial Northern Territory. As with most occupation colonies, the tropical Territory was regarded as geographically unsuited to large-scale white settlement. As with plantation colonies it was presumed that

¹²*Ibid.*, p. 11.

¹³*Ibid.*, p. 14.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, p. 11.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 180 and 330.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, pp. 22-23.

agriculture would require the importation of indentured Asian labour. Then again, as with 'mixed' colonies, the indigenous people did come to form the basis of the labour force, particularly in the pastoral industry.

The category which stands out as being distinctly inappropriate is that of 'pure' settlement in that it specifically aimed to reproduce European society and thus encouraged a white proletariat rather than 'coloured' labour. This category demanded 'racial' homogeneity while all others promoted some kind of 'mixed race' or plural society. White Australia was designed as a reinforcement of the colonial model of 'pure' settlement which was more typical of the southern colonies. Had the 'mixed' colonies of the north been more politically powerful we might have referred instead to the formation of a Plural Australia. As it was, the 1890s when the notion of a White Australia was formulated, was the peak period for the employment of 'coloured' labour in Australia.¹⁷ If we are to engage seriously in writing histories of Australia's plural past, then we cannot continue to give privileged status to the discourse of 'pure' settlement over that of 'mixed' colonialism.¹⁸

Plural Australia

One way to provide an approach to the writing of a plural colonial past is to compare Australia with other plural societies. If we set aside the assumption that the northern Australian colonies had nothing in common with those in Asia, it is possible to find suitable models for comparison. The British colonial administrator, J. S. Furnivall, for example, writing on the Dutch East Indies, characterised its plural society as a 'segmented society' based on a multi-racial caste system. He described Java's culturally heterogeneous groups as living side-by-side 'yet without mingling in the one political unit'. Furnivall argues that this is 'typical of tropical dependencies where the rulers and the ruled are of different races'.¹⁹ In Furnivall's model, he assumes certain characteristics as a corollary of this 'racial' division. For example, in terms of political constitution, he argues that unlike a homogeneous society, which must consider the demands of society as a whole, in the case of a plural society, 'there is no community as a whole'.²⁰ In terms of economy, he argues that 'in a unitary society, the working of the

¹⁷Markus, *Australian Race Relations*, p. 85.

¹⁸Fieldhouse, *The Colonial Empires*, p. 12.

¹⁹J. S. Furnivall, *Netherlands India, A Study of Plural Economy*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1944, p. 446.

²⁰*Ibid.*, p. 463.

economic process is controlled by social will'. To engage in the practice of employing sweated labour, for example, would incur moral sanctions from 'the social conscience' of the nation. Such sanctions, he argues, are not applicable in plural societies where a sectional division of labour assumes hierarchical economic castes based on 'race'.²¹

According to Furnivall, it is not possible to apply the principles of democratic nationalism to a plural society.²² Another commentator, van Doorn, argues that the Dutch East Indies system was intended to facilitate the administration of the 'exploitation colony', in which 'the social distance separating the colonial elite from the mass of population remained not only administratively, but economically marked'.²³ The word plural, therefore, in van Doorn's usage, describes not only a multi-ethnic society, but also the imposition of a colonial 'racial' hierarchy upon that society – a hierarchy which is inherently undemocratic and actively discourages a broader sense of community.

If we imagine Australia's colonial past in terms of a Plural Australia, are we to assume this same level of hierarchy and separation? I have emphasised these points, as I feel they were at the heart of White Australia's rejection of pluralism. If we assume this kind of plural society, then pluralism would appear to prevent the development of nationalism — the phenomenon presupposes a continuing colonial status. But the plural society of Darwin, which began life in the colonial form, was soon to be subsumed by the Australian nation. It therefore became imperative for Australian nationalists to find a way to reconcile these apparently conflicting characteristics. The debate over these broader theoretical questions may not be obvious in White Australian discourse, but having recognised the 'problem' of plural nationalism, as set out by Furnivall, we are in a better position to identify this recurring theme: in effect the discourse of Plural Australia running beneath the surface of the official discourse of White Australia.

In constructing a framework from which to analyse Plural Australia, it is also pertinent to consider the work of Fieldhouse. His formulation of the 'mixed' colony model raises two important issues, both vital to understanding the problem of an emerging White Australian nationalism from a plural society. According to Fieldhouse, both 'plantation' and 'mixed'

²¹*Ibid.*, pp. 449-50.

²²*Ibid.*, pp. 467-8.

²³J. J. A. van Doorn, 'A Divided Society: Segmentation and Mediation in Late-Colonial Indonesia', in *Papers of the Dutch-Indonesian Historical Conference*, Bureau of Indonesian Studies, Leiden, 1982, p. 128.

colonies had no place for a white proletariat, relying as they did on 'coloured' labour.²⁴ And yet, according to Denoon, the distinguishing feature of settler colonies was the presence of a white labour force. He describes the transition from unfree imported labour to free local labour.²⁵

Denoon's argument implies that settler colonies were morally justified in excluding imported labour on the grounds that their intention was to encourage 'free' labour. He nevertheless acknowledges the limitations of the 'free' labour system, noting that in Australia the indigenous population were excluded from the benefits of 'free' labour, as were indentured workers. (As exceptions to this rule, he cites the cases of Queensland, Natal-Zululand — now known as KwaZulu Natal — and northern Argentina, where plantations and coerced labour were maintained.²⁶) But the reason for this inequity in the white labour system was that it was premised on an understanding of Australia as a 'pure' rather than 'mixed' colony. The northern tendency towards 'plantation' and 'mixed' colonialism was regarded as an aberration to be eradicated. The White Australian project was patently inappropriate for a plural society, but nationalists imagined that such obstacles could be overcome.

A study of our colonial past in terms of 'mixed' colonies also raises issues of citizenship and representation. British colonial policy in regards to the granting of responsible or representative government was based on these categories of colonisation. Those colonies deemed to be 'pure' settlement colonies, reproducing British society, were granted self-government. Colonies of occupation, were denied self-government on the grounds that non-Europeans were incapable of governing themselves.²⁷

In the case of 'mixed race' colonies, however, nineteenth-century humanitarians preferred to retain British control so as to protect the interests of non-European inhabitants. Fieldhouse notes that under these terms the Caribbean sugar colonies, the Cape and New Zealand would have been disqualified from representative government.²⁸ The latter two were eventually passed, for pragmatic reasons of economy.²⁹ In 1864, however, the Jamaican electorate of 1,903 Europeans in a total population of 450,000, the majority of whom were emancipated slaves were denied 'responsible government'. To give the minority power was regarded as inequitable but

²⁴Fieldhouse, *The Colonial Empires*, p. 14.

²⁵Denoon, *Settler Capitalism*, pp. 36-7; Fieldhouse also highlights the formation of a European proletariat in *The Colonial Empires*, p. 58.

²⁶Denoon, *Settler Capitalism*, p. 123.

²⁷Fieldhouse, *The Colonial Empires*, p. 254.

²⁸*Ibid.*, p. 258.

²⁹*Ibid.*, p. 260.

the prospect of enfranchising the majority 'offended mid-nineteenth century British political principles'.³⁰ Fieldhouse does not include Queensland in this category. Nevertheless, in 1859 when it was granted self-government, citizenship was similarly restricted to a small European population, allowing them to rule over a non-European population of indigenous, indentured, and migrant residents. According to one critical colonist, Gideon Scott Lang, the years after Queensland established self-government saw the destruction of Aboriginal people that was 'wholesale and indiscriminate and carried on with a cold blooded cruelty on the part of the whites quite unparalleled in the history of the colonies'.³¹ Perhaps such issues need to be discussed in terms of inappropriate categorisation and therefore inappropriate policies.

North-South divisions

The notion that northern Australia was a separate entity from southern Australia was common in the nineteenth century. In 1862, the Duke of Newcastle in the British Colonial Office announced his intention to divide the Northern Territory along the line of the Tropic of Capricorn, with the southern part to be allocated to South Australia and the north to Queensland. When Queensland declined the offer, South Australia pushed to annex the whole of the Northern Territory and in 1863 the British agreed to their request.³² This act created the first internal colonisation within Australia. The juxtaposition of South Australia as colonial master and Northern Australia as colonial territory emphasised the distinction between the two climatic regions. The temperate region, with predominantly white settlers was 'naturally' placed in a position of dominance over the tropical colony.

British labour policy in its tropical colonies had long since established the use of 'coloured' or 'coolie' labour. After the abolition of slavery in 1833, the British took steps to ensure a supply of 'coolie' labour from China, signing the Convention of Peking of 1860.³³ The need for 'coloured' labour in tropical colonies was generally accepted. Colonies of exploitation were intended to produce goods at maximum profit for their colonial masters and this required a source of cheap labour. The 'coolie' classes of India and China

³⁰*Ibid.*, p. 259.

³¹Lang cited in Henry Reynolds, *This Whispering in Our Hearts*, p. 97.

³²Alan Powell, *Far Country: A Short History of the Northern Territory*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, 1982, pp. 73-4.

³³Myra Willard, *History of the White Australia Policy to 1920*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, 1923, p. 15.

were regarded as a ready-made labour force, already accustomed to hard labour for little return. These prejudices were well-entrenched in colonial culture and remained at the centre of their labour policy well into the twentieth century.

The perceived suitability of 'coloured' labour was informed by British understanding of 'racial' theory. According to Robert Miles, since the late eighteenth century scientists had argued that human physical appearance was determined by climatic conditions, whereby constant exposure to the hot sun, for example, had resulted in the dark skin colour of the African peoples. Environment was similarly held responsible for supposed cultural characteristics such as laziness. 'Racial' characteristics, therefore, were regarded as adaptations and it followed that 'degeneration' was possible if white populations were to settle in the tropics. Those few who served as colonial masters were cautioned against excessive exposure to sun and heat and were advised to take breaks in cooler climates to restore their health. These attitudes were considered no less relevant in tropical Northern Australia.

In her history of the White Australia policy, Myra Willard argued that for the British the 'proximity of Australia to the millions of Asia was considered one of its peculiar advantages'. According to Joseph Banks, Australia, like the Dutch East Indies, would benefit from being able to obtain 'abundant and cheap labour from the continent of Asia'.³⁴ Colonial policy adviser, E. G. Wakefield, proposed in 1829 that Chinese workers should be indentured, arguing that these "'most industrious and skillful Asiatics'" would probably convert "the enormous wilderness of Australia" into a "fruitful garden".³⁵ Wakefield applied this principle to the entire continent, suggesting that Indians and Pacific Islanders might be induced to work in New South Wales. It was agreed in a Select Committee appointed in 1837 by the Legislative Council that a few Indian labourers should be brought in as an experiment. The committee recommended that in regards to Australia's tropical regions, 'the services of coolies would be of great benefit for the cultivation of sugar and cotton, coffee and tobacco'.³⁶ Wakefield is perhaps best remembered for his plans to promote settlement in South Australia, a plan usually thought of as favouring 'pure' British immigration.³⁷ Nevertheless, his suggestions for New South Wales are more in keeping with the model of a plantation colony, which would have created a 'mixed

³⁴*Ibid.*, p. 1.

³⁵*Ibid.*, p. 2.

³⁶*Ibid.*, p. 4.

³⁷Fieldhouse, *The Colonial Empires*, p. 253.

race' colony. A. C. Palfreeman argued that there was a 'widespread acceptance of the necessity for coloured indentured labour' in Queensland in the last two decades of the nineteenth century.³⁸

Even at this early stage, there was White Australian opposition to this policy. The Immigration Committee of 1841 argued that a system of 'coolie immigration' would allow the permanent settlement of an 'alien' and 'servile' community whose presence would lower the wages of European workers by competing as cheap labour.³⁹ British authorities argued against the introduction of 'coolie' labour in Australia, Lord Glenelg, the Secretary of State for the Colonies stating that such a policy would 'bring rural work in the Colony into disrepute and check the emigration of the British agricultural class'. Sir William Molesworth regarded indentured labour as tantamount to slavery and argued that 'Indian immigration would only curse Australia with the social and political difficulties of a racial problem'.⁴⁰ This opposition, however, tended to focus on southern Australia.

As Ann Curthoys has noted, the use of 'coloured' labour was more typically a northern phenomenon in Australia's tropical colonies of Queensland, Northern Territory and Western Australia.⁴¹ The Queensland government was convinced of the need for indentured 'coloured' labour for its tropical regions, in particular for its sugar plantations. The use of 'Kanakan' labour had supplied this need, but their systematic exploitation made this policy at odds with the alleged humanitarianism of British colonial practice. Thus in 1874 the Queensland government considered importing a number of Chinese labourers, arguing that the Chinese authorities would be in a better position to control recruitment and prevent the abuses of the Kanaka system.⁴² This suggests that the concept of 'coolie' labour was already shifting from the usual notion of an expendable labour force. In Australia at least, there were signs that a compromise was sought between the interests of profit and those of humanitarianism. The practice of employing 'coloured' labour on the Queensland sugar fields flourished right up until Federation, with most small farmers as well as plantation owners preferring to employ Islander or Asian labour over white labour.⁴³

³⁸Yarwood, A. T., *Attitudes to Non-European Immigration*, Cassell Australia, Melbourne, 1968, p. 5.

³⁹Willard, *History of the White Australia Policy*, pp. 2-5.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, pp. 6-7.

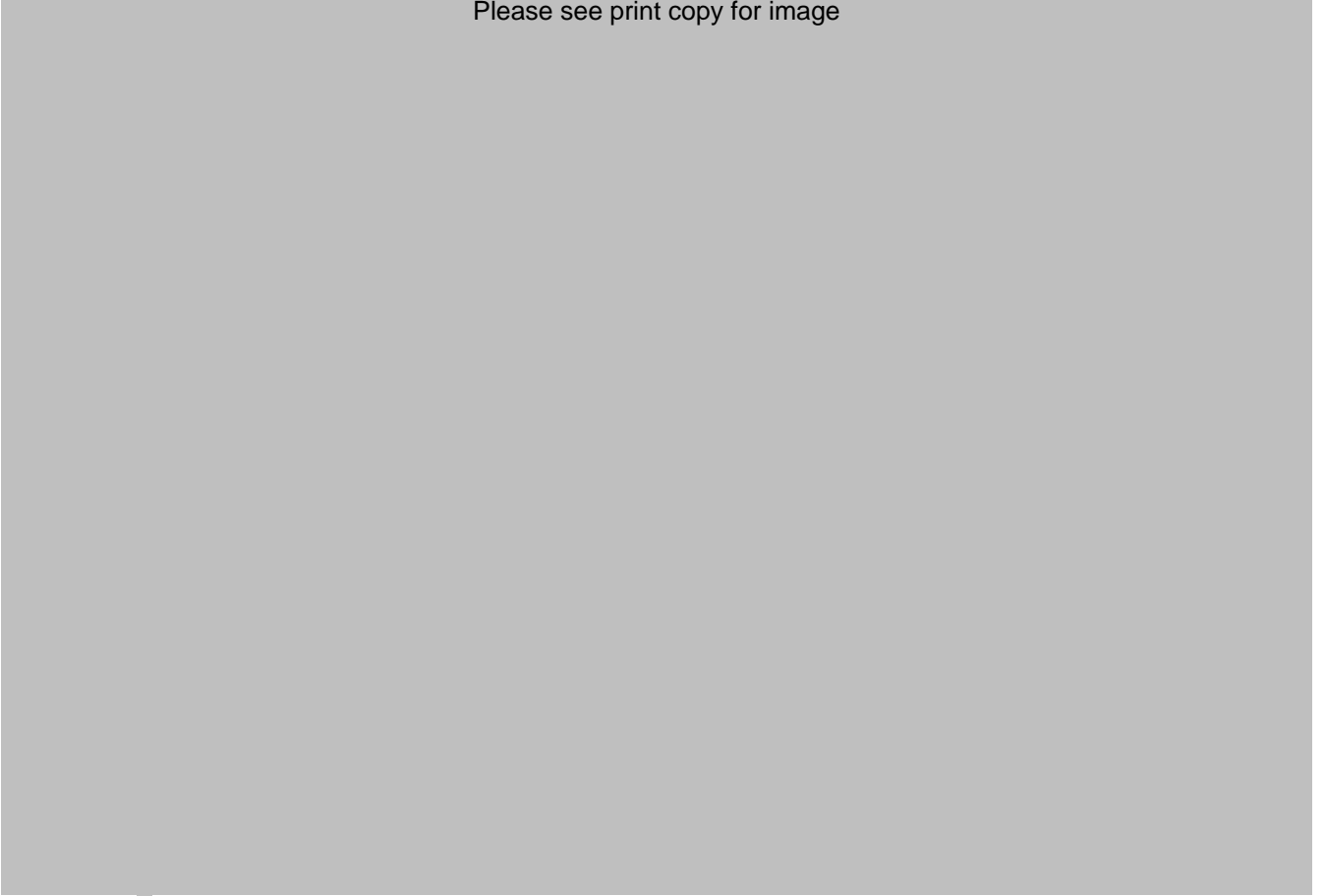
⁴¹Ann Curthoys, 'Conflict and Consensus', in *Who Are Our Enemies?*, Hale & Iremonger, Neutral Bay, 1978, p. 49.

⁴²Willard, *History of the White Australia Policy*, p. 38.

⁴³In fact the use of 'coloured' labour in Queensland continued after Federation despite union protests. Doug Hunt, 'Exclusivism and Unionism', in *Who Are Our Enemies?*, pp. 84-5.

Map of tropical Australia and its northern neighbours.

Please see print copy for image



(Alan Powell, *Far Country, A Short History of the Northern Territory*,
Melbourne University Press, Carlton, 1982, p. 4)

The Western Australian government, when considering its northern regions, was similarly of the opinion that 'coloured' labour was required. In 1880, at the Intercolonial Conference, only Western Australia disagreed with the proposal to restrict Chinese immigration, arguing that they proposed to introduce indentured Chinese labour. The other colonies protested, asking the British Government to force Western Australia to comply or face a trade boycott.⁴⁴ This coercion on the part of the other colonies indicates the ability and desire of White Australia advocates to overpower and suppress any opposition. Eventually Western Australia conceded, making an exception only for those workers under the provisions of the Imported Labourers' Registry Act of 1884, which was primarily directed at labour for the northern pearling industry. This exception was to continue right throughout the White Australia period.⁴⁵

Tropical Northern Territory

The Northern Territory was the third region which fell within the tropical zone. Its northern-most area, known as the Top End, which includes Darwin, falls within 11° and 15° south latitude — well within the tropics.⁴⁶ Perhaps to an even greater degree than the other colonies, the Territory was linked in popular imagination with its near northern neighbours: the outer islands of the Dutch East Indies, New Guinea and the ports of Macassar, Kupang and Rabaul.⁴⁷

British plans for colonising the northern coast of Australia were based on the Singaporean model. The desire to strengthen British naval power and to protect trading routes had led them to take Singapore in 1819 and Malacca in 1824.⁴⁸ The British were concerned over the growing influence of the Dutch in the East Indies, and possible French interest in the area. In 1823, a committee of merchants advised the Colonial Office that a profitable commerce might be built up with the Malay trepang-fishers, the Bugis, to the north of Australia. Stations were set up by the British at Fort Dundas and Raffles Bay, but both failed and were abandoned.⁴⁹ Several years later, the British merchant, G. W. Earl warned the government that Northern Australia lay open to the Dutch or to 'any European or Asiatic power which

⁴⁴Willard, *History of the White Australia Policy*, p. 64.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, p. 67.

⁴⁶Powell, *Far Country*, p.2, 6.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, p.137.

⁴⁸Fieldhouse, *The Colonial Empires*, p. 77.

⁴⁹A. Grenfell Price, *The History and Problems of the Northern Territory, Australia*, 1930, Northern Territory Library, North Australia Collection, p. 3.

might wish to found a second Singapore'.⁵⁰ In 1838, the British established a third base on the Coburg Peninsula at Port Essington, but it too was abandoned eleven years later.⁵¹

Port Darwin was established in 1869 by George Woodroffe Goyder, the Surveyor General of South Australia. The town was originally named Palmerston, but the harbour was known as Port Darwin.⁵² Port Darwin was founded on dreams of wealthy Asian markets and visions of a second Singapore.⁵³ Few envisaged that a large white working population would be invited to settle in the north. Nevertheless, the story of 'settlement' is usually told within this framework. Beverley Kingston describes the South Australian government's failed attempts to sell land in the Northern Territory 'according to the same principles used in the initial settlement of South Australia'.⁵⁴ Her emphasis on the Territory as a remote and mysterious region which was to remain 'sparsely settled' assumes that the colonisation of the north needs to be understood in terms of the southern experience: as being a failed attempt at white settlement.

From the beginning, however, Port Darwin was represented as having a climate unsuitable to white workers. Goyder wrote:

It is true that the heat is great and the climate oppressive for six months of the year. For Europeans it is as bad as some parts of India. The same amount of work cannot be done as in South Australia without great determination and exertion. But our experience is of men new to the locality ... Much may be done by acclimatization ...⁵⁵

As with other tropical colonies, Goyder anticipated that the physical work would to be done by 'coloured' labour.⁵⁶

According to Alan Powell, the South Australians who came to the Northern Territory regarded themselves as being 'in the vanguard of the greatest civilization the world had ever seen'. He argued that they spurned the ancient Chinese civilization as 'degenerate and corrupt', were suspicious of the 'fast-rising industrial power of the Japanese, and believed that the

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, pp. 4-5.

⁵¹Powell, *Far Country*, p. 55-7.

⁵²Douglas Lockwood, *The Front Door, Darwin, 1869-1969*, Angus & Robertson, London, 1969, pp. 31-7.

⁵³Powell, *Far Country*, p. 101; Grenfell Price, *The History and Problems*, pp. 4-5, 11.

⁵⁴Kingston, *The Oxford History of Australia*, p. 5.

⁵⁵Cited in Lockwood, *The Front Door*, p. 38.

⁵⁶David Johanson, 'History of the White Australia Policy', in Kenneth Rivett (ed.), *The Immigration Reform Group, Immigration: Control or Colour Bar? The Background to 'White Australia' and a Proposal for Change*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, 1962, p. 21.

Aboriginal people were doomed.⁵⁷ This assumption of 'racial' superiority, common to most colonials in this period, did not prevent them from advocating the use of 'coloured' labour and the establishment of a 'mixed' colony.

In an account published in 1882, William Sowden described his impression of Port Darwin after his visit with the South Australian parliamentary party. He concluded that:

With regard to the effect of the climate upon labour, there seems to be a consensus of opinion that Europeans cannot do the hewing and drawing. That must be undertaken by coloured folk.⁵⁸

Lord Brassey, speaking in favour of imported labour in 1887, recommended that Australia should

reserve for our own race those parts of the country in which they can succeed, in which they can not only labour, but preserve and perpetuate from generation to generation, the qualities which have made them great. While the policy seems clear in relation to regions adapted to the physical qualities of our own race, it seems not less clear for the regions beyond, where the Anglo-Saxon race cannot perform manual labour.⁵⁹

The scientific consensus at this time was that climate played a significant part in shaping both the physical and mental capacities of each 'race' and that any attempt to adapt the white population to a tropical climate would eventually lead to its degeneration.

Aboriginal labour

Colonial racism rested on a long tradition of contact and conflict with indigenous peoples outside Europe. From their earliest encounters with 'natives' of the New World the Europeans used loose racial categories such as 'black' to designate difference. However, in keeping with the principles of

⁵⁷Powell, *Far Country*, p. 109.

⁵⁸William Sowden, *The Northern Territory As it is, A Narrative of the South Australian Parliamentary Party's Trip*, Adelaide, Thomas and Co., 1882, pp. 146-7.

⁵⁹Address by Lord Brassey to the Adelaide Chamber of Commerce, 1 June 1887, in Annie Brassey, *The Last Voyage to India and Australia in the 'Sunbeam', November 1886-December 1887*, Longmans, Green & Co. London, 1889, p.468, British Library.

ethnocentrism, the basis by which the Europeans classified the 'natives' as inferior was cultural rather than biological. Lacking any concept of western 'civilisation', their very humanity was questioned.⁶⁰ According to Ruth Benedict, 'the natives were regarded as outside the pale of humanity, without religion, law or morals.'⁶¹ Early British colonial discourse represented 'natives' in terms of their blackness, heathenism, savagery, beastliness and voluptuousness'. The central focus was on their lack of Christianity: their black skin being taken as a sign of their 'possession by the devil'.⁶²

The transformation of colonial ethnocentrism into racism coincided with the emergence of a scientific discourse of 'race'. Whereas it was once believed that 'natives' could be shown the path to 'civilisation', this was challenged by the idea that 'the human species was divided into permanent and discrete biological groups'.⁶³ According to anthropologist of the time, Aboriginal Australians were deemed to be 'in as nearly a primitive condition as it is possible to find in any part of the world'.⁶⁴ Already in 1869 when Port Darwin was established, scientific notions of evolution had come to believe in the intrinsic inferiority of the Aboriginal people. Evolutionist Alfred Wallace had written that they would inevitably die out through contact with the more 'developed' Europeans.⁶⁵ This notion of biological determinism supposedly rendered useless the 'civilising' mission.

Scientific doctrine regarding indigenous peoples did not necessarily influence the way in which Aboriginal people came to be employed as a labour force in the Northern Territory. Notions of 'civilisation' and 'evolution' no doubt coloured colonial perspectives, but in the nineteenth century, indigenous policy was largely a matter of pragmatism rather than 'science'. Despite the policy decision to employ 'coloured' labour, the Aboriginal population was rarely discussed in government documents as a potential labour source. Though absent from the pages of official policy, Aboriginal workers were undoubtedly an important source of labour for the new colony. The British colony of Port Essington in the 1840s had employed

⁶⁰Miles, *Racism*, p. 11.

⁶¹Ruth Benedict, *Race and Racism*, Routledge, London, 1943, p. 107.

⁶²Jordan cited in E. Van den Boogaart, 'Colour Prejudice and the Yardstick of Civility: the Initial Dutch Confrontation with Black Africans, 1590-1635', in R. Ross (ed.), *Racism and Colonialism*, Mortimus Nijhoff Publishers, The Hague, 1982, p. 38.

⁶³Miles, *Racism*, p. 33.

⁶⁴A. W. Howitt, 1891, cited in Russell McGregor, *Imagined Destinies, Aboriginal Australians and the Doomed Race Theory, 1880-1939*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, 1997, p. 35.

⁶⁵Markus, *Australian Race Relations*, p. 15.

Aboriginal workers; they helped to build the settlement and worked for the British as sailors and servants.⁶⁶

Initially, in Port Darwin there was some uncertainty as to how the local Aboriginal people would respond to the European presence. Goyder, the Surveyor General, was aware that they acted as usurpers of Aboriginal land. He mapped out the land around Darwin harbour, belonging to the Larakia (called 'Larrakeeyah' by Goyder) people and their neighbours the Djerimanga ('Woolner' or 'Woolna') and Kingarakan ('Warnunger'). Goyder wrote:

We were in what to them appeared unauthorised and unwarranted occupation of their country ...Territorial rights are strictly observed by the natives ... it is scarcely to be wondered at if, when opportunity is allowed them, they should resent such acts by violence upon its perpetrators.⁶⁷

Nevertheless, Goyder was convinced that their mission was 'to civilize "these miserable specimens of humanity", to teach them Christianity and the benefits of working for their keep under the Europeans who were destined to take and use their lands.'⁶⁸ It would appear, that Goyder regarded the transaction of land and labour in return for their 'keep' as equitable.

Sociologist Pierre van den Berghe argues that the development of racist distinctions worked to justify the continued colonial practice of slavery when such exploitation was no longer acceptable among European workers. He wrote:

If it was immoral to enslave people, but if at the same time it was vastly profitable to do so, then a simple solution to the dilemma presented itself: slavery became acceptable if slaves could somehow be defined as somewhat less than fully human.⁶⁹

⁶⁶Powell, *Far Country*, p. 59; Speaking of southern Australia, Alan Pope argued that 'without the considerable and timely labour of Aborigines during periods of labour shortage in the 1840s and 1850s, the struggling colony would have collapsed'. Alan Pope, 'Aboriginal Adaptation to Early Colonial Labour Markets', *Labour History*, no. 54, May 1988, p. 14. See also Ann Curthoys, 'Good Christians and Useful Workers: Aborigines, Church and State in NSW, 1870-1883', in Sydney History Group, *What Rough Beast? The State and Social Order in Australian History*, Allen & Unwin, St Leonards, 1982, pp. 31-56.

⁶⁷Cited in Powell, *Far Country*, p. 83.

⁶⁸*Ibid.*

⁶⁹P. Van den Berghe, *The Ethnic Phenomenon*, Elsevier, New York, 1981, p. 115.

Thus Goyder was able to justify unpaid Aboriginal labour on the assumption that their employment would in some way improve their level of 'humanity'.

When Sowden described the people on the almost empty streets of Darwin in 1880, he noted that two thirds were 'blackfellows, naked with a red cloth'.⁷⁰

Though so murderous in their tribal wars, these fellows are tame enough in the presence of whites, and really are very useful, though fickle in their fancies, and as loath to work as an average working man's strike demagogue. The young lubras are engaged by the English as washerwomen and charwomen, and they work very well, I am told. Indeed, altogether they are almost indispensable to the whites.⁷¹

It is immediately striking that Sowden's tone is that of paternalism. Given the appalling record of frontier colonists in Queensland in this period the reports from Darwin are surprising. And yet this attitude was not unlike those in other tropical British colonies, such as India, where 'racially'-defined relationships of master and servants were represented as 'natural' and benevolent. It is difficult to compare the experiences of Aboriginal workers in the small port of Darwin with those in Queensland's frontier pastoral stations.⁷² Clearly the circumstances were quite different.

In regard to large-scale plans for tropical agriculture in the Northern Territory there were official doubts as to the 'usefulness' of Aboriginal workers.⁷³ Government Resident, B. Douglas, declared in the 1870s that the Territory was only suitable for

the white capitalist, tradesman, stockman, squatter, digger, and skilled artisan. The labouring class, as employed on the plantations, pastoral runs, and in domestic service, must be natives, either

⁷⁰Sowden, *The Northern Territory as it is*, p. 143.

⁷¹*Ibid.*, p. 144.

⁷²According to Raymond Evans employment by pastoralists in the colonial period was akin to slavery. Raymond Evans, ' "Kings" in Brass Crescents. Defining Aboriginal Labour Patterns in Colonial Queensland', in Kay Saunders (ed.), *Indentured Labour in the British Empire 1834-1920*, Croom Helm, London, 1984, p. 189.

⁷³P. Donovan, *A Land Full of Possibilities, A History of South Australia's Northern Territory*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1981, p. 186.

imported coolies or such aborigines as will work; on the latter, I fear, it will not do to depend.⁷⁴

This common claim in colonial labour rhetoric, that the Aboriginal population did not represent a 'dependable' source of labour, was used to justify the importation of 'coolie' labour. In fact large numbers of Aboriginal workers were employed by pastoralists. Andrew Markus estimates some 5,000 to 10,000 in Australia in the 1890s.⁷⁵ Nevertheless, the Northern Territory policy makers were initially in favour of a 'plantation' colony with imported labour, rather than relying on the indigenous population.

Malay workers

Goyder's first suggestion for Darwin was that labour could be drawn from the Dutch East Indies. He wrote:

Labour can be readily obtained from the adjacent islands, and at a cost so trifling compared with that of European labour that the latter would only be resorted to where inspection or direction became necessary.⁷⁶

The adjacent islands which Goyder referred to were the islands of Timor, in particular from the nearby port of Kupang. Had these plans for the colonisation of Darwin been implemented, the society would have closely resembled the ports of the Dutch East Indies, with Europeans ruling over Malay workers and Chinese 'middlemen'.⁷⁷ The Dutch East Indies system of government had developed over several centuries. In contrast, colonial governments in Australia never accepted the presence of large-scale imported labour to the extent that they felt the need to include them in any formal social strategies.

For Darwin's administrators to have encouraged a Malay presence would have been in keeping with previous British policy for setting up trade with the seafaring Bugis. They were well aware of the long history of Malay contact with the north coast of Australia. The Malay fleet which Matthew

⁷⁴Grenfell Price, *The History and Problems*, p. 19.

⁷⁵Markus, *Australian Race Relations*, p. 85; for a detailed study of Aboriginal workers in the pastoral industry see Ann McGrath, *Born in the Cattle*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1987.

⁷⁶I have used the contemporary term 'Malay' which was somewhat ambiguous. For the most part, the workers in question were from the Dutch East Indies, present-day Indonesia. Cited in Lockwood, *The Front Door*, p. 38.

⁷⁷Lockwood, *The Front Door*, p. 46; van Doorn, 'A Divided Society', p. 128.

Flinders encountered in 1803, were, according to Campbell Macknight, Maccassarese, from the southwest of the Celebes.⁷⁸ These traders and fishermen, however were unlikely to be considered as a source of cheap labour for Darwin. Writing in 1871, Government Resident Douglas advised that in order to cultivate tropical agriculture, 'coolie labor must be imported' and that it would be useless 'to depend on a supply from the islands in the Arafura Sea, or Java, or the Dutch East Indian Islands. Chinese coolies must be imported.'⁷⁹

Thus there was no immediate attempt to bring in labourers from the nearby islands. Ten 'Malays' were brought in from Singapore, in 1874 by Captain Douglas along with the one hundred and eighty-six Chinese. Some were employed by private individuals and some engaged at the crew of the Government cutter 'Flying Cloud'.⁸⁰ Sowden, writing in 1882, described the Malay crews of the Government luggers as 'excellent boatmen' and 'merry fellows'.⁸¹

In 1879, the population of the Territory, not including the large Aboriginal population, was put at 460 Europeans, 30 Malays and 3406 Chinese.⁸² It was not until after 1884, with the discovery of pearlshell in Port Darwin, that divers and crew were drawn from nearby Kupang.⁸³ Even then, the presence of Malay workers in Darwin was rarely discussed in government policy.

Japanese labour

With the advent of pearling in Darwin, the population became more ethnically diverse. Added to the mix were Thursday Islanders, Japanese and Filipinos.⁸⁴ The most predominant ethnic group amongst the pearling crews, however, was the Japanese, and by 1898 there were approximately 300 living in Port Darwin. Most of these worked in the pearling trade, three

⁷⁸Campbell Macknight, *The Voyage to Marege, Macassan Trepangers in Northern Australia*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, 1976, pp. 1 and 97. See also D. J. Mulvaney, *Encounters in Place: Outsiders and Aboriginal Australians, 1606-1985*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1989, pp. 22-23.

⁷⁹B. Douglas, Government Resident of the Northern Territory, Letter dated 28 July 1871, NARU f174 4648.

⁸⁰Margaret Rendell, *The Chinese in South Australia and the Northern Territory in the Nineteenth century*, M.A. thesis, University of Adelaide, 1952, pp. 47-9.

⁸¹Sowden, *The Northern Territory as it is*, p. 124.

⁸²*Ibid.*, p. 64.

⁸³Lockwood, *The Front Door*, p. 125.

⁸⁴In this instance, the term Malay is referring to Singaporean. Powell, *Far Country*, p. 105.

owning luggers, but there were also 'miners, carpenters, boarding-house keepers, cooks, servants, a doctor and twenty or more prostitutes'.⁸⁵

The history of the Japanese in Australia is perhaps better known in connection with Queensland's history. Regina Ganter, in her 1994 study *The Pearl-Shellers of Torres Strait*, considered how the Japanese became indispensable in the northern pearling industry.⁸⁶ According to Ganter, the first recorded Japanese diver in the Torres Strait arrived in 1876 and learnt the skill of dress-diving from a Malay. In 1885 there were over one hundred Japanese at Thursday Island and the Japanese foreign ministry was concerned over the conditions under which they were working. In order to discourage migration, the Japanese government prohibited contracts where passage was paid by the employer. In 1891 the new Japanese Foreign Minister took a more favourable view towards emigration to Australia and Japanese merchants began to finance migration.⁸⁷ The population at Thursday Island increased and by 1894 there were over 700 Japanese — outnumbering the European population. When an oversupply of labour resulted, 100 unemployed Japanese found work on sugar plantations. By this stage, Japanese business interests owned their own luggers. This ownership meant that the Japanese were now 'in competition with, instead of in the service of the pearl-shellers'.⁸⁸ Ganter argues that Japanese commercial solidarity was a serious threat to white pearl-shellers. Queensland altered the law in 1898 so that they could not rent boats or be issued boat licenses.⁸⁹ Ganter's study suggests that the Japanese in the pearling industry undermined the colonial social structure by threatening white control and authority over 'coloured' workers.

Apart from their presence in pearling, the Japanese also worked in the Queensland sugar industry. There were 2651 indentured Japanese recruited on three-year contracts between 1892 and 1901.⁹⁰ In the Territory, however, the Japanese did not engage in plantation work. Those who worked in Port Darwin were mainly skilled labourers. This was not to say that they were not considered as potential agricultural workers. In 1877, the South Australian government offered the Japanese free passage and farm land in Northern Australia but the offer was refused by the Japanese government.⁹¹ According

⁸⁵Eric Rolls, *Sojourners: The Epic Story of China's Centuries Old Relationship with Australia: Flowers and the Wide Sea*, St Lucia, University of Queensland Press, 1992, p. 28.

⁸⁶Regina Ganter, *The Pearl-Shellers of Torres Strait, Resource Use, Development and Decline, 1860s-1960s*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, 1994, p. 100.

⁸⁷*Ibid.*, pp. 100-102.

⁸⁸*Ibid.*, p. 104.

⁸⁹*Ibid.*, p. 106.

⁹⁰Markus, *Australian Race Relations*, p. 87.

⁹¹Grenfell Price, *The History and Problems*, p. 19.

to David Walker, the Japanese feared an 'exodus of skilled workers'.⁹² Nevertheless, this offer was indicative that the South Australian government regarded the Japanese as potential settlers, rather than simply as contract labourers — a quite different approach to that pursued in Queensland. More surprising was the offer made in 1898. According to a letter written to the Marquis of Salisbury, J. Langdon Parsons had written negotiating the sale of land at Adelaide River near Port Darwin to Japanese capitalists. Parsons was of the opinion that the political party to which he belonged, which favoured Japanese immigration, was likely to be returned to power after the next election.⁹³

David Northrup's study of indentured labour in this period reminds us that these debates were also taking place in other tropical colonies, which may have influenced Australian decisions. In Hawaii, for instance, 30,000 Japanese emigrated from 1885-95 on three year contracts and more than half decided to stay on.⁹⁴ Indentured contracts had been made illegal in the United States from 1885, but it was not until the United States annexed Hawaii in 1900 that this prohibition extended to those islands.⁹⁵ In this sense, the relationship between the United States and Hawaii parallels that of the Commonwealth and the Northern Territory.

Chinese labour

In fact, the main source of so-called 'coolie' labour in the Territory were the Chinese workers, brought to Australia via Hong Kong and Singapore. The first shipment of Chinese labourers arrived from Singapore in 1874. There were two schools of thought in regard to the use of Chinese labour in the Territory. Unlike the other ethnic groups, the Chinese were the subject of fierce and complex debate. One group were insistent that the 'coolies' be indentured and eventually repatriated. The other argued that the land was to be settled with a permanent population of 'coloured' workers. Presumably the first was regarded as a temporary measure while they engaged in the 'taming' of the Territory, until such a time as the land became fit for white settlement, while the other assumed that the tropics would remain a colony of exploitation.

⁹²David Walker, *Anxious Nation*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1999, p. 121.

⁹³Ernest Satow to the Marquess of Salisbury, 22 September 1898, South Australian Records, CO 13 153, No. 146, Public Record Office, Kew.

⁹⁴David Northrup, *Indentured Labor in the Age of Imperialism, 1834-1922*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1995, p. 73.

⁹⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 74 and 142.

The Premier of South Australia, John Hart, clearly regarded the Territory as inhospitable and unsuited for white settlement. He stated in 1863 that 'It is expected that Chinese labour will ... be found very useful in North Australia'. Though aware of moves to restrict Chinese immigration, the South Australian government assumed that this would not apply to the Northern Territory. The reason submitted was they were required for the development of the tropical Territory and that they would hesitate to keep out 'the only kind of labour that seemed willing to go there'.⁹⁶ At that time there were already some 37,720 Chinese in Australia, with approximately two-thirds residing in Victoria.⁹⁷ Beverley Kingston comments that the tropics were regarded differently from the south, arguing that in the north, the Chinese outnumbered the white population therefore seeming 'less out of place'.⁹⁸ By 1878 there were over three thousand Chinese in the Territory — more than the European population, and by 1888 with the construction of the Pine Creek railway, the Chinese population peaked at just over seven thousand.⁹⁹ As Alan Powell has noted, it was the Chinese who dominated all colonial enterprises: they built the railway, dominated the goldfields and established market gardens and trading stores in Darwin.¹⁰⁰ David Walker has similarly noted that contemporary observers described Palmerston as an 'Asiatic settlement' and that H. E. Pratten, considered Port Darwin to be 'an Oriental port'.¹⁰¹ These descriptions were intended as a warning to Australians, lest the north be taken over by 'Asiatics', but not all regarded the Chinese presence as a negative factor. J. L. Parson, Government Resident of the Territory from 1884 to 1890, was said to have had 'the greatest faith in future prospects, provided always that coloured labour was employed'.¹⁰²

The steady importation of Chinese labour during these years did prompt public protest. In 1878, the Governor, Sir William Jervois, expressed his intention to introduce more Chinese. The residents of Port Darwin held a public protest and threatened to secede from South Australia if he went ahead.¹⁰³ The government response was to tighten the legislation affecting Chinese residents, prohibiting the employment of Chinese on government

⁹⁶Willard, *History of the White Australia Policy*, p. 65

⁹⁷Kingston, *The Oxford History of Australia*, p. 135.

⁹⁸*Ibid.*, p. 136.

⁹⁹Markus, *Australian Race Relations*, p. 72.

¹⁰⁰Leonard Blussé spoke of the Chinese settlement in Batavia as a 'Chinese colonial town'. Port Darwin was similar in this respect. See Chapter V, 'Batavia 1619-1740: The Rise and Fall of a Chinese Colonial Town', *Strange Company, Chinese Settlers, Mestizo Women and the Dutch in VOC Batavia*, Foris Publications, Dordrecht, 1986. pp. 73-96.

¹⁰¹Walker, *Anxious Nation*, pp. 119 and 254.

¹⁰²Powell, *Far Country*, p. 97, Grenfell Price, *The History and Problems*, p. 17.

¹⁰³Rendell, 'The Chinese in South Australia', p. 59.

contracts. Nevertheless the Chinese did have some local supporters. The editor of the *Register* responded:

No matter how exemplary may be their conduct, no matter how eager may be their desire to work, no matter how great may be the dearth of labourers in the market, ... the fiat has gone forth that the Chinaman must not be engaged. ... The Government have ordered to be written up in every public office, and to be included in every Government contract, the invidious and arbitrary direction, 'No Chinese need apply'.¹⁰⁴

In fact, this law was not rigorously enforced, but the anti-Chinese message was made quite clear.

Chinese residents were further discriminated against with the passing of the Constitution Act of 1882 which debarred naturalised Chinese from enrolling as voters, and denied them the privileges of citizenship.¹⁰⁵ By the late 1880s, the South Australian government implemented a poll tax of £10 for each new Chinese migrant in the Territory if they went beyond the 20 mile radius from Port Darwin. In addition, all vessels coming from China and the Straits Settlements were to be placed in quarantine for 21 days following claims that Chinese passengers carried small-pox.¹⁰⁶

It was not until 1885, however, that immigration restriction was considered and by 1888 new laws were implemented.¹⁰⁷ Herbert Parsons wrote:

The Parliament of South Australia has recognised the necessity of cheap coolie labour from the time when the Northern Territory was annexed, and until, at any rate, about 1886, nobody ever expressed any expectation that the Territory would be developed except by the labour to be obtained from the East.¹⁰⁸

The attitude of the South Australian parliament was still pro-Chinese when a group visited Darwin in 1882. At a banquet given by the Chinese to the parliamentary party, J. Langdon Parsons, later Government Resident, told how the forefathers of Europeans 'still roamed the woods as unclad

¹⁰⁴Rolls, *Sojourners*, p. 11.

¹⁰⁵Rendell, 'The Chinese in South Australia', p. 169.

¹⁰⁶Willard, *History of the White Australia Policy*, p. 73.

¹⁰⁷*Ibid.*, pp. 23-4.

¹⁰⁸Herbert Parsons, 'The Truth about the Northern Territory', Adelaide, 1907, NARU, f121, 3194, p. 58.

barbarians' when the Chinese 'had attained a high degree of civilization'.¹⁰⁹ Sowden, in his report, supported the presence of Chinese in the Territory both in terms of their capital enterprises and as workers. He argued that geographically, the connection with China was vital, pointing out that Hong Kong was closer than Sydney and that imports from Hong Kong were almost seven times that from Adelaide. He wrote:

I have again and again, interviewing the best and wealthiest of the race now residing there, been assured that it will become a second Singapore if they can make it so — a greater Singapore, because it has its rich gold-fields.¹¹⁰

Eric Rolls makes a similar point in discussing the writings of Way Lee, a wealthy Adelaide merchant who published 'The Chinese Question: From a Chinaman's Point of View' in 1900. Way Lee had suggested that the Northern Territory might grow rice to export to China. He wrote:

If the Northern Territory were only properly used and colored labor employed it might be made the most prosperous portion of Australia. There is no reason why this valuable piece of country should be held at a loss to the general community of several scores of thousands sterling a year.¹¹¹

The economic benefits of exploiting Chinese 'coolie' labour, therefore were advocated by both European and Chinese entrepreneurs and parliamentarians.

In terms of the Chinese cultural presence, Sowden was inclined to play down any cultural difference. He argued that the 'old conservatism of the Imperial Government of China is fast breaking up,' and that they were becoming 'modern'.¹¹² Nor was he an advocate of segregation in Darwin. He supported the rebuilding of the Chinese hospital, claiming that it was necessary as 'the white patients manifest a decided repugnance to Chinamen being in the same ward'. He added: 'Why Chinese should not be allowed to

¹⁰⁹Lockwood, *The Front Door*, p. 85.

¹¹⁰Sowden, *The Northern Territory as it is*, p. 127.

¹¹¹Note the spelling of 'colored' as opposed to 'coloured'. This spelling was most common in the writings of left-wing critics, possibly being influenced by American literature. Cited in Rolls, *Sojourners*, p. 250.

¹¹²Sowden, *The Northern Territory as it is*, p. 128.

enter it is to me a mystery.'¹¹³ Sowden's employed irony to mock his readers, whom he presumes to be 'Chinaphobists'. He wrote:

The next thing you observe is the absence of the foulness and dirt which prejudice had forewarned you to expect. Though the houses are not so good, you find they are quite as clean and sweet and wholesome as those of the other quarter. This is true nearly all through, and the only conclusion I can form, and yet be loyal to my Chinaphobists, is that the childlike and bland Celestials were keeping the best side out till the Parliamentary party left. ... But move politic or otherwise, the Chinese of this Territory received the Minister, though some of them were aware that he has been one of their strongest opponents in the House, with a cordiality which the Europeans scarcely equalled. ¹¹⁴

In 1883, the retiring Government Resident, E. W. Price, was similarly sympathetic to the Chinese population. He addressed a farewell gathering of Chinese as 'Gentlemen', and described them as good colonists and citizens. In his speech he said that he was happy that the new hospital would give Chinese equal admittance and that he would be willing to have the next bed occupied by a Chinese.¹¹⁵ This attitude is significant as it suggests a break with British and Dutch colonial practices. In those colonies, segregation of the 'races' was taken for granted and few would have preached on the merits of integration.

It is not surprising, therefore, that Darwin's Chinese merchants still regarded the South Australian government as representing their interests, despite the escalating incidents of discrimination. Around 1882, a petition was sent by the merchants to J. L. Parsons, the Minister for the Northern Territory, stating that:

The Chinese residents of Palmerston have not lately been treated in their opinion with that spirit of justice which is supposed to characterize British government. Prosecutions for trivial offences are conducted by the police in a most vindictive spirit, the sole object being apparently to obtain convictions ...¹¹⁶

¹¹³*Ibid.*, p.135.

¹¹⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 142-3.

¹¹⁵Lockwood, *The Front Door*, p. 85.

¹¹⁶Rolls, *Sojourners*, p. 9.

This letter was clearly designed to appeal to the spirit of liberal humanitarianism which was thought to exist amongst the parliamentarians.

Nevertheless, the notion of a 'natural' hierarchy remained. A common theme expounded by those in favour of continued Chinese immigration was their usefulness as servants to the white population. This attitude was taken from other colonial societies such as Singapore where white colonials encouraged a pluralism which mimicked the strict class structure of Britain. Alfred Searcy, Customs officer wrote:

It is only those who have lived in the Territory who can realise what an important factor in its present organisation the Chinese are. Remove them tomorrow, and the residents of Palmerston would be left without fish, vegetables or fruit, to a large extent without meat, without laundries for their washing, neither would there be any tailors, cooks or domestic servants.¹¹⁷

Similarly Mrs. Dominic Daly, as one who advocated the use of Chinese servants, wrote:

Domestically, the advent of the Chinese was a blessing. Instead of the European ladies of the settlement having to do their own work they had a proper staff of Chinese boys.¹¹⁸

For those with a colonial mentality, the presence of 'coloured' workers was not a threat to their way of life, but the means by which they could sustain their indolent lifestyle. Following the enactment of the Commonwealth Immigration Restriction Act of 1902, the Government Resident reported that the decrease in the Chinese population was alarming as it meant that 'all the best men are leaving the Northern Territory, and already cooks and waiter-boys are demanding a higher rate of wage.'¹¹⁹

The *Northern Territory Times*, however, rejected this view, calling for 'the settlers to oppose, by force of arms if necessary, any further invasion of our country.'¹²⁰ They wanted an Anti-Chinese League to fight against the further introduction of 'coloured' labour. Their White Australian slogan was:

¹¹⁷*Ibid.*, p. 3.

¹¹⁸Lockwood, *The Front Door*, p. 81.

¹¹⁹Annual Report of the Northern Territory, 1902, p. 20.

¹²⁰Lockwood, *The Front Door*, p. 81.

Australia for the Australians! To those who want Chinese cheap labour and Chinese or blackfellow colonists, we say, go and reside with them in their own country.¹²¹

M. V. Solomon, editor of the *Times*, had originally supported Chinese immigration, but as trade began to pass into Chinese hands, the white business community joined in with the labourers and demanded the exclusion of Chinese.¹²² How strongly the *Times* supported such legislation, however, is open to debate. When the restrictions were finally in place in 1902, the *Times* commented:

It must be left to the future to show whether it be the wise embodiment of a great ideal — or one of the most narrow, selfish, and crazy pieces of legislation ever placed upon the Commonwealth Statute Book.¹²³

If there is one striking factor in the debate regarding the importation of Chinese labour it is the plethora of contradictory opinions. In 1894, when the Hon. J. Warren discussed the issue in the Legislative Council, he stated that he wished to alter public opinion, which was against the importation of Asiatic labour. He may have assumed the existence of public opposition, but the 1895 Royal Commission concluded 'that a majority were in favour of using Asiatic labour' but recommended that their time of service and residence should be limited.¹²⁴ The conflicting statements regarding so-called public opinion indicate the deep divisions within the public on this issue. Most histories have chosen to tell the story of anti-Chinese sentiment, but Cathie May's study of Chinese in Cairns suggests that it was not unknown for white communities to openly favour the continued presence of Chinese. She notes that during the 1890s the residents of Cairns gained a bad reputation in the south, with Cairns being known as a place where 'white men take their hats off to Chinamen'.¹²⁵

¹²¹*The Times*, cited in Lockwood, p. 85.

¹²²Willard, *History of the White Australia Policy*, p. 72.

¹²³Cited in Rolls, *Sojourners*, p. 416.

¹²⁴Rendell, 'The Chinese in South Australia', p.187.

¹²⁵Cathie May, 'The Chinese in Cairns and Atherton: Contrasting Studies of Race Relations, 1876-1920', in Paul Macgregor (ed.), *Histories of the Chinese in Australasia and the South Pacific*, Museum of Chinese Australian History, Melbourne, 1995, p. 49.

The politics of Federation

Just as the public were divided, so too were the politicians. There was no area of compromise to be reached between the 'colonials' and the 'nationals' on this issue. As the sentiments of White Australia nationalists became more radical, the South Australian government views became more colonial. Their arguments were overtly opposed to the developing White Australia policy. Edward Price, Government Resident in 1880, argued that 'the Indian coolie would be preferable, as more likely to settle in the country after the expiration of his term.'¹²⁶ He clearly did not suffer from the White Australian phobia regarding permanent 'coloured' populations. In 1888 the government argued against Chinese immigration, claiming that they showed little inclination to work in tropical agriculture as 'coolies' but preferred to be 'their own masters'.¹²⁷ It was argued that cheaper labour than the Chinese would be needed and that Indian labour or more particularly Tamil 'coolies' might be suitable.¹²⁸ Once again, this violated the ethos of White Australia which claimed to be against the creation of a 'servile' workforce.¹²⁹ Much of the debate over 'coloured' labour stemmed from the opposing views of labour and capital. Ann Curthoys has pointed out that: 'If we now see the White Australia Policy as a national issue, with little class conflict involved, the people who created it did not.'¹³⁰

White Australianists used the rhetoric of humanitarianism to reject colonial proposals. When the Northern Territory Commission of 1895, recommended that alien labour should be introduced, with limitations as to the time of their service and residence in the Northern Territory, Sir Frederick Holder and Mr. Archibald dissented, arguing that Australia should be 'kept free from servile races and from racial antagonism and mixed blood'; that European labourers were capable of working in the tropics; and that the abuse and loss of life suffered by the Kanaka workers was unacceptable.¹³¹

The lead-up to Federation and the creation of the Australian nation prompted considerable parliamentary debate over the issue of 'coloured' labour and the creation of a White Australia. The need to find a consensus

¹²⁶Edward Price, Government Resident, 'Sketch of the Northern Territory', No. 138, 1880, South Australian Parliamentary Papers, p.3, NARU f172 4594.

¹²⁷Willard, *History of the White Australia Policy*, p. 73.

¹²⁸Parsons, 'The Truth', p. 57.

¹²⁹Rendell, 'The Chinese in South Australia', pp. 184-5.

¹³⁰Ann Curthoys, 'Racism and class in the nineteenth-century immigration debate', in Andrew Markus and M. C. Ricklefs (eds.), *Surrender Australia? Essays in the study and uses of history*, Geoffrey Blainey and Asian Immigration, George Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1985, p. 96.

¹³¹Parsons, 'The Truth', p. 55.

was strongly supported. Some argued for a simple division along the 20th parallel, creating a separate tropical zone in which 'coloured' labour would be allowed. Others advocated a united Australia based on a single White Australia policy. Deakin and his Protectionist cohorts, used the example of the United States to predict a dire future for a divided Australia. Parallels were drawn between North Australia and 'coloured' labour and slavery in America's Deep South. This divisive issue had led America to civil war, and the fear of following that path swayed those who were otherwise reluctant to give up 'coloured' labour as a concession to the Federation movement.

Those who opposed White Australia, however, claimed that the ramifications for international relations were more important. White Australia flew in the face of British colonial policy and the new nation, which proclaimed its British heritage, risked alienating the British government. Isolationism was described as a dangerous path by John Howard Angas, who in 1890 spoke in the South Australian parliament against the restriction of Chinese immigration. He argued that it would be doing a great injustice to Northern Australia if they were to prevent the introduction of Chinese labour. He demonstrated a sense of the broader international implications stating that:

In view of what was unquestionably the great future of China we should be cultivating friendly relations instead of being apparently anxious to come to a breach on every possible occasion. They were destined as a people to play an important part in the southern world.¹³²

The agenda of international politics, however, was overshadowed by the more immediate concerns of Federation politics.

In 1894, when Warren called for 'coolie' labour to enable tropical products to be cultivated he argued for the economic benefits of reducing the burden of maintaining the Territory. The Chief Secretary objected that the introduction of alien labour would complicate intercolonial relations and interfere with federation, however advantageous it might be from a commercial point of view.¹³³ Ultimately, the impetus to prohibit immigration was generated by Federation politics, in particular, the 1896 Intercolonial conference at which the Premiers agreed to extend the Restriction Bill of 1888 to include 'all coloured races'. Only the Queensland

¹³²Rolls, *Sojourners*, p. 3.

¹³³Rendell, 'The Chinese in South Australia', p. 187.

government was able to resist the pressure and retain the right to import Pacific Island Labourers.¹³⁴ It is important to recognise, however, that there never was any consensus on the issue of White Australia in the 1890s — it was simply a matter of political expediency that differences were put aside in order to achieve the goal of Federation.¹³⁵

Conclusion

During the years from 1869 up until federation in 1900, South Australian government policy for the Territory was shaped by British colonial policy for its tropical possessions. This policy was grounded on the assumption that 'coloured' labour was 'racially' suited to manual labour in the tropical climate and that white colonials would form an elite ruling class. The rationale for this policy was varied. With regard to Aboriginal labour, the supposed 'civilising' mission of the colonisers was emphasised. With regard to Chinese labour, however, the logic of capitalism outweighed other considerations. Cultural arguments, which sought to justify the continued use of Chinese labour, included a certain liberal cosmopolitanism which fought against the xenophobic rhetoric of the labour movement. Similarly, the interests of international politics were deemed to be furthered by a *laissez-faire* labour policy. The evidence does indicate some local protest in regard to perceived competition and 'racial contamination' from 'coloured' immigration. The strength of that protest, however, did not outweigh the strength and conviction of the colonial faction.

This chapter has drawn a brief sketch of colonial Plural Australia, highlighting the widespread acceptance of 'coloured' labour as necessary to the development of the Australian colonies. Colonial Plural Australia was largely exploitative in character, but within that system there was some evidence of 'friendly' inter-ethnic relations, particularly between the white and Chinese elite. In this sense, Darwin differed little from other tropical colonies such as the Dutch East Indies. The image of colonial Australia as plural is intended to provide an alternative backdrop to the traditional 'British settler' narrative. This early history of Plural Australia allows that discussion to move beyond the confines of the White Australia paradigm. The rest of the thesis is devoted to the examination of twentieth-century Plural Australia and its interactions with White Australia. Federation is usually depicted as the divide between Australia's colonial history and its

¹³⁴Willard, *History of the White Australia Policy*, p. 109.

¹³⁵Gizen-No-Teki, *Colorphobia*, pp. 22-3.

national history. This division is based, not simply on the creation of the nation, but on the advent of White Australia. Such a divide becomes blurred, however, if we trace the path of Plural Australia. The continued employment of 'cheap coloured' labour suggests a largely uninterrupted narrative. Nevertheless, the advent of White Australian nationalism forced a shift in the discourse of 'coloured' labour. What emerges by the late 1930s is an entirely new concept of a plural society, as Plural Australia is reinvented to suit the 'modern' nation.

Chapter three

White Australians, 1901-1920

This chapter considers expressions of White Australian nationalism as they related to 'coloured' labour in the first decades of the twentieth century. White Australian discourse is firstly examined from the perspective of the national parliament in the aftermath of federation. In this context, support for White Australia is demonstrated to be little more than a tool for party politics. The second section considers the implementation of White Australia in the multi-ethnic town of Darwin. This period saw the demand for white labour preference grow as overt racism dominated the Australian Workers' Union (AWU) and its Darwin branch. Nevertheless, as the principles of White Australia were put into practice, a whole new, and often contradictory debate ensued, in which the clear-cut category of 'white' Australian came to be questioned.

This chapter is the first of three which examines responses to 'coloured' labour in Australia in the first half of the twentieth century from a political or ideological perspective. Rather than assuming its unanimous acceptance, the White Australia ethos is considered as merely one possible position. Chapter four discusses the ideology of internationalism which influenced the thinking of the left-wing of the labour movement. Chapter two has already outlined colonial attitudes towards 'coloured' labour. Chapter five returns to this colonial perspective, discussing post-federation 'colonialism' particularly as it was expressed by conservatives favouring *laissez-faire* capitalism. Having acknowledged the existence of opposing interest groups, we cannot then imagine White Australia as a monolithic presence simply because it was described as the official national policy. The construction of White Australia has suggested a static, all-encompassing phenomenon. This chapter seeks to demonstrate that even amongst its staunchest advocates, White Australia was from its inception a problematic policy. As an ideology, White Australia was constantly challenged and re-expressed in ways which shifted its focus and character.

White Australia and party politics

The term White Australia, used in the lead-up to federation and beyond, conjured up a vision of the new Australian nation. The intention was to create a homogeneous white population in Australia by restricting the immigration of 'coloured' peoples and deporting those already domiciled in Australia.¹ The passing of the *Immigration Restriction Act* of 1901 was the first step in a series of regulations designed not only to exclude 'coloured' immigrants but to discriminate against those who remained.

During the 1901 parliamentary debate on White Australia, it was made clear that the egalitarianism on which the new nation was predicated, was to be limited to white citizens. Watson, leader of the Labor Party, stated:

We have claimed that all citizens should have equal opportunities. We never say that 'all men are equal'. No sensible set of men would ever say so. But we say that every man should be equal with every other man in the eyes of the law, and that equal opportunities should be afforded so far as the law can allow ... to every citizen. And we reserve the right to say who should be citizens.²

Having implicitly defined the citizens of Australia as white (and male), the Labor Party was then able to talk freely about equality, persuading themselves that 'racial' homogeneity was in the interests of socialism.³ Their belief in the science of Social Darwinism and its corresponding 'racial' hierarchy, allowed them to legitimise this position. This stance was not new. Sociologist John Rex noted that the principles of the French Revolution, which proclaimed liberty, equality and fraternity for all, was similarly limited to white workers. Despite their progressive stance, Rex argues that non-Europeans were regarded as 'non-men' and thus 'revolutionary ideals did not apply to them'.⁴

According to Russel Ward in *A Nation for a Continent*, the White Australia policy was based on three concerns, those being 'racial', economic

¹John Rickard, *The Present and the Past, Australia, A Cultural History*, Second Edition, Longman, Harlow, 1996, p. 115.

²Watson cited in Gizen-No-Teki, *Colorphobia, An Exposure of the 'White Australia' Fallacy*, R.T. Kelly, Sydney, 1903, p. 98.

³M. C. Hartwig, 'Aborigines and Racism' in F. S. Stevens (ed.) *Racism: The Australian Experience*, Volume 2, Australia and New Zealand Book Co., Sydney, 1972, p. 18.

⁴Rex's use of the term 'non-men' is problematic as it leaves open the question of women's position in the revolutionary vision. J. Rex, *Race Relations in Sociological Theory*, Routledge, London, 1970, pp. 35-6.

and social.⁵ Emphasising 'racial' motives, Labor leader, Watson was confident that he would gain popular approval. He claimed to object to 'the mixing of these colored people with the white people of Australia' on the grounds that it would result in 'racial contamination'.⁶ Ward highlights the paradox that 'the more democratic, the more radical, the more 'progressive' a person was in other ways, the more strongly racist he was likely to be.'⁷ William Lane, for example, a leading radical of the 1890s, believed that the nation's success was linked to the purity of its 'blood' and that the 'colour line' was necessary to protect 'Aryans' from intermarriage and 'racial degeneration'.⁸

Watson's view on 'racial contamination' was supported by the liberal Protectionist Attorney-General, Alfred Deakin, who stated:

We here find ourselves touching the profoundest instinct of individual or nation – the instinct of self-preservation – for it is nothing less than the national manhood, the national character, the national future, that are at stake.⁹

Deakin was not merely concerned with the preservation of the 'race' in a physical sense, but also with the preservation of British cultural heritage. The qualities of Australian 'manhood' were believed to be intrinsic to their 'racial' heritage. Biological determinism meant that it was impossible to separate the 'racial' from the social or cultural in their vision of the new nation.

The economic benefits to which Ward refers are the supposed benefits for white workers. It was assumed, that with the removal of competition from 'coloured' labour, the white workers would be in a position to sustain higher wages.¹⁰ Ward's belief in the 'worker's paradise' myth needs to be put aside, however, and a more critical position taken.¹¹ Any notion that 'coloured' workers were a hindrance to the labour movement was simply a product of 'racial' stereotyping. Deakin played on this when he stated that

⁵Russel Ward, *A Nation for a Continent, the History of Australia, 1901-1975*, Revised Edition, Heinemann Educational Australia, Richmond, 1983, first published in 1977, p. 37.

⁶Watson cited in Gizen-No-Teki, *Colorphobia*, p. 91.

⁷Ward, *A Nation for a Continent*, p. 18.

⁸Andrew Markus, 'White Australia? Socialists and Anarchists', *Arena*, nos. 32-3, 1973, pp. 80-2; David Walker, *Anxious Nation*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1999, pp. 41-44.

⁹Deakin cited in Gizen-No-Teki, *Colorphobia*, pp. 102-3.

¹⁰Ward, *A Nation for a Continent*, p. 33.

¹¹Richard White has noted that the idea of Australia as a worker's paradise 'reinforced discrimination against women, children, non-whites, the unemployed and other sections of the working class, since only the successful, adult, white male fitted the image of the 'workingman'. *Inventing Australia, Images and Identity 1688-1980*, Allen & Unwin, St Leonards, 1981, p. 46.

the Japanese are the most dangerous because they most nearly approach us, and would, therefore, be our most formidable competitors. It is not the bad qualities, but the *good* qualities of these alien races that make them dangerous to us. It is their inexhaustible energy, their power of applying themselves to new tasks, their endurance, and *low standard of living* that makes them such competitors.¹²

The assumption was not, therefore, that 'coloured' workers were inferior workers, but rather, that their cultural background had conditioned them to expect low wages and long hours. As Andrew Markus has pointed out, even when Chinese workers engaged in unionist activities in the late nineteenth century, they were still unable to elicit a responding solidarity from White Australians.¹³ Racist assumptions meant that the terms 'non-union' and 'coloured' were used interchangeably. Chapter seven takes up this issue and shows that this equation came to be broken down in later years.

While the 'racial' benefits of the White Australia policy may appear spurious to us, this was the very point on which most people agreed. The belief in 'racial' hierarchy was almost unanimous, but there was, nevertheless, a distinct divide within parliament over the White Australia policy in regard to the issue of 'coloured' labour. White Australians, who were primarily members of the Labor Party and the Deakin Protectionist Party, were those prepared to support white workers at all costs — even if it meant subsidising capitalist ventures in order to protect higher white wages. The opposing Free-trader ideology has already been touched-on in chapter two and will be raised again in chapter five.

The Free-traders were said to support the continued use of cheap 'coloured' labour. Their vision of the nation was mockingly described as a Piebald Australia or a Black Australia. Protectionist Deakin, who was highly critical of Free-trader leader George Reid, referred to their party as the Coloured Labour Party.¹⁴ The Free-traders, in contrast, claimed that they were up-holding the traditions of British liberalism and cosmopolitanism against the 'racial prejudice' of White Australian advocates.¹⁵ Each group therefore, sought to bring a moral agenda to the debate. The need to justify

¹²Deakin cited in Gizen-No-Teki, *Colorphobia*, p. 105.

¹³Verity Burgmann, 'Writing Racism Out of History', *Arena*, no. 67, 1984, p. 80.

¹⁴Geoffrey Sawer, *Australian Federal Politics and Law, 1901-1929*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, 1956, p. 76.

¹⁵Gizen-No-Teki, *Colorphobia*, Chapter Two.

their policies in moral terms sprang from the nation-building context of the debate. As Benedict Anderson has argued, the nation was presumed to be the ideal moral construct whatever its actual inequalities.¹⁶ The emphasis therefore, for all politicians, was to construct an image of the nation in its ideal moral form. Not everyone believed that White Australia was the best possible option.

It is important to remember, however, that the ethos of White Australian nationalism was not etched in stone, but was merely a series of loosely-formulated prejudices against 'coloured' immigrants. According to one critic of White Australia, who went by the pseudonym of Gizen-No-Teki, meaning 'enemy of hypocrisy', many of the arguments put forward were contradictory. In his 1903 book, titled *Colorphobia*, he wrote that during the parliamentary debates,

some members spoke of the evils that arose from the mingling of white Australians with alien races, while other members objected to the aliens because they kept to themselves and would not mingle with Australians. Then some members objected to the ignorant alien, while others objected with equal force to the educated one.¹⁷

Like so many political speeches, their rhetoric was intended to win votes rather than expound any logical or consistent view.

Gizen-No-Teki addressed his book, *Colorphobia, An Exposure of the 'White Australia' Fallacy*, to 'the Australian Labor Party, not the representatives of that party in parliament, but the many sincere, though deluded voters, who, through lack of political intelligence, have put them there'. He added a quotation from Luke: 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do'. Gizen-No-Teki pointed out that the Labor Party had resorted to an appeal to 'racial prejudice' in order to win the support of the Free-traders, who were opposed to the removal of 'cheap' labour. He argued that Labor sought to represent the 'coloured' worker

as a danger to the alleged purity of our race, and a menace to our political, national, and social institutions. Racial prejudice is appealed to, and any amount of misrepresentation indulged in, in order to obtain to the doctrine of exclusion the support of those who

¹⁶Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*, Verso, London, p. 6.

¹⁷Gizen-No-Teki, *Colorphobia*, p. 102.

would reject the proposal upon industrial or economic grounds alone.¹⁸

It is worth considering the parliamentary speeches in detail. The Senate debates contain lengthy justifications for White Australia, espoused by both Labor and Protectionist parliamentarians. Queensland's Labor Senator, William Higgs, used the example of Natal to highlight the adverse effect of creating a 'racially' stratified society. He was critical of Natal's segregationist policy which allowed Indian immigration only under contract, and set their wages at five shillings per week. He quoted the 1900 Natal legislation which stated that

no Indian may go abroad in the streets of Natal without a badge showing whose servant he is. If found without a badge he is lodged in gaol. No Hindoo or native African may exercise the vote, engage in trade of any kind unless he can prove his ability to keep suitable books in the English language. ... No Indian may walk the streets after dark, and may only use the middle of the road — side-walks not being for him.¹⁹

Having criticised their social system, however, Higgs, went on to state that the British Imperial Government

will no doubt insist upon Indian subjects having equal rights with white men, but the future federal States of South Africa will, I believe, defy the Home Government as did New South Wales.²⁰

Having rejected both segregation and equality, Higgs was left with only the White Australia solution: to create a 'racially' homogeneous society. He does indicate, however, that the British solution would be to allow all citizens equal rights. This aspect of British liberalism was to play a significant role in moulding White Australian opposition over the following decades.

Gizen-No-Teki was sceptical of Watson's claim that the *Immigration Restriction Act* was benevolent in that it was designed to prevent contract labourers from 'binding themselves into slavery in ignorance'. He asked why they could not simply 'abolish the law of contract, so far as it refers to

¹⁸*Ibid.*, pp. 3-4.

¹⁹*Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates (CPD)*, Senate, 1901, p. 7179.

²⁰*Ibid.*

imported labor'. He suggested legislation to prevent immigrant workers from being compelled to complete their contract in case of deception as to working conditions and a clause obliging the agent to provide transport back to their own country.²¹ In fact, the *Immigration Restriction Act* was amended to exclude all contract labourers from entering Australia. As Lenore Layman has discussed, however, the real motive behind this amendment was revealed when the exclusion was first applied to British contract workers, resulting in a public outcry.²²

According to Labor senators, the vision of Australia's future without immigration restriction was bleak. Labor Senator Staniford Smith, of Western Australia, gave the classic argument which cited the concerns of the labour movement over the perceived competition from 'coloured' labour. He stated:

The influx of Eastern races would cause an enormous amount of wretchedness and misery amongst our labouring classes. I have no hesitation in saying that if a sufficient number of Asiatics came here to work, as the Hindoos do, for 1s. a day, they would reduce our civilization to chaos.²³

Another Western Australian, Labor Senator Hugh De Largie, supported White Australia, arguing that 'in Western Australia we have had a taste of what the Asiatic curse is'. He complained that they had 'entered into almost every trade and calling in that State.'²⁴

Gizen-No-Teki, sharply critical of such statements, argued that the Labor party

perpetually represented Japan as a country inhabited by 45 millions of impoverished 'little brown men', who were ready to swoop down upon Australia in hordes, and to offer their services in the labor market at a beggarly rate of pay, on which no white man could live. The frequency with which the assertion has been made, that Australia is in danger of being 'swamped' by 'hordes' or 'millions' of

²¹Gizen-No-Teki, *Colorphobia*, pp. 94-6.

²²Lenore Layman, "'To Keep up the Australian Standard': Regulating Contract Labour Migration 1901-50", *Labour History*, no. 70, May 1996, pp. 25-52.

²³CPD, 1901, p. 7243.

²⁴CPD, 1901, pp. 7279-7280.

colored aliens, has evidently caused it to be regarded by some people as a strong argument.²⁵

It is heartening to realize that contemporary critics of White Australia were equal to the task of exposing such fallacies. This 1903 criticism is remarkably in line with our present attitudes towards White Australian representations.

Senator Best was even more pessimistic in predicting future strife. He argued that Australia might follow America into civil war if they allowed the north to continue employing 'coloured' labour. He asked: 'Can we look upon an object-lesson of that kind, and not take the earliest steps to prevent the possibility of such a thing occurring within our shores?'²⁶ Gizen-No-Teki's response to this notion was that it was a misreading of the lesson, in that it confounded 'Slavery and Color, for no other reason than because the American slaves were colored.'²⁷

One factor which is usually thought to distinguish Labor from Free-traders, was the degree of British imperial arrogance entailed in the Free-trader position. But Labor Senator Staniford Smith was not wanting in this regard. He stated:

It seems to have become the destiny of the British race to perform two duties - one to rule over an immense number of coloured races, and the other to preserve the vacant temperate lands of the world for the British and white races.²⁸

In this context, he is referring to Australia as both vacant and temperate. The myth of Australia as 'vacant' stemmed from its categorisation as *terra nullius*, which officially denied Aboriginal presence and sovereignty.²⁹ By referring to Australia as temperate Smith excluded the tropical north from his vision of White Australia.

According to contemporary theories of climatic determinism, the Northern Territory, being in the tropics was not classified as a site for British 'settlement'. In fact, most senators believed that the tropics could be developed only with 'coloured' labour, white workers being physiologically incapable of sustained manual labour in the heat.³⁰ They wanted to lay claim

²⁵Gizen-No-Teki, *Colorphobia*, pp. 64-5

²⁶CPD, 1901, p. 7269.

²⁷Gizen-No-Teki, *Colorphobia*, p. 59.

²⁸CPD, 1901, p. 7243.

²⁹Henry Reynolds, *The Law of the Land*, Penguin, Ringwood, 1987, p. 12.

³⁰See similar view in Queensland sugar fields in Doug Hunt, 'Exclusivism and Unionism', *Who Are Our Enemies?*, Ann Curthoys and Andrew Markus (eds.), Hale and Iremonger, Neutral Bay, 1978, p. 81.

to the entire continent in order to protect their dream of White Australia, but in so doing, they believed that the north would have to be left 'vacant'; sacrificed for the good of the south.³¹ Protectionist Senator Best, echoing Deakin, argued that 'Australia would rather that those millions of acres should remain unoccupied than that its British population should be tainted by the inroad of aliens'.³²

The policy of ignoring Australia's tropics was, however, politically untenable. By 1908, the federal parliament had turned its attention towards the Territory as they debated whether or not to take over from the South Australian government. Chanter, the Member for Riverina, stated that the Northern Territory should be taken over for defence purposes and that 'perhaps millions could be successfully settled'.³³ Senator Walker suggested that the Federal government pay the South Australian government a portion of passage money for immigrants from Europe, Canada, or America.³⁴ Suddenly everyone was adamant that the tropics could sustain a white population.

One of the reasons for this change of heart, was the increasing pressure of British criticism. During a debate over the White Australia policy in the House of Representatives, the *Westminster Gazette*, was cited. It was argued that 'the success of the White Australia policy depends on whether a sufficient number of immigrants are attracted to justify the exclusion of non-whites'.³⁵ To this, Deakin responded that they would take decisive steps

to plant settlers in the unpeopled portions of the Commonwealth, and thus comply with the suggestion that to have a White Australia it is necessary that there must be a large population of white men in the Northern Territory and elsewhere.³⁶

It was, therefore, the needs of White Australia that were uppermost in the minds of the government as they considered the Northern Territory.

Following party politics in this period is extraordinarily complex, but given that the issue of White Australia was used as a tool for political bargaining it is necessary. In November 1908, Andrew Fisher, now leading the Labor Party, declared that he would no longer support the Deakin

³¹As usual in this period, the Aboriginal population were simply ignored.

³²*CPD*, 1901, p. 7269.

³³Chanter, Member for Riverina, in House of Representatives, *CPD*, 3rd Parliament, 3rd Session, Volume 47, 1908, p. 28.

³⁴Senator Walker, Senate, *CPD*, 1908, p. 62.

³⁵McDougall in Representatives, *CPD*, Volume 47, 1908, p. 992.

³⁶Deakin, Representatives, *CPD*, 1908, p. 992.

Government. Having the greater number of seats, Fisher was able to form a Labor Ministry.³⁷ Anticipating the possible rift between Labor and Deakin, the Anti-Socialist Party, made up of former Free-traders, took action. Reid resigned as their leader and was succeeded by Joseph Cook. With Cook as leader, Deakin was now prepared to negotiate a fusion of their parties. The Fusion or Liberal Party took office from Labor in 1909. The new ministry which contained Protectionists and five former Free-traders differed in policy and style from the previous Deakin ministry.³⁸ Significantly, during the brief Fisher Ministry, the only new legislation which was passed was an amendment to strengthen the *Immigration Restriction Act*.³⁹ This emphasises the fact that Labor regarded this policy as their particular platform.

Professed attitudes towards White Australia were largely influenced by these political manoeuvres. Cook, aware that Deakin was a firm believer in White Australia, sought to reassure him of their loyalty. An exchange in the House of Representatives on White Australia amply demonstrates this intention:

Mr. Joseph Cook — So far as that legislation aims at, or is intended to keep intact our racial purity, it has no firmer or warmer supporters than honorable members on this side of the House.

Mr. Fisher — They are all of that opinion now!

Mr. Joseph Cook — So far as I know, there is no member in the House at the present time who would contravene those ideals and aspirations in any way whatever. We, on this side, are as keen for a white Australia as is the honorable member for Wide Bay.

Mr. Fisher — Nothing succeeds like success! Only yesterday honorable members were howling the contrary!⁴⁰

Fisher went on to accuse the Anti-Socialists of 'strong and bitter criticism of the White Australia policy, exposing their hypocrisy to parliament.⁴¹ In the hands of politicians at least, White Australia was little more than a rhetoric device.

³⁷Sawer, *Australian Federal Politics*, p. 65.

³⁸Those being Cook, Glynn, Fuller, Millen and Foxton, in *Ibid.*, pp. 64-66.

³⁹*Ibid.*, p. 67.

⁴⁰Cook and Fisher, Representatives, *CPD*, 1908, p. 116.

⁴¹Fisher, Representatives, *CPD*, 1908, p. 131.

Even Fisher was not above changing his public position in order to appear more in line with Deakin. When it was put to Fisher that Labor favoured White Australia only for industrial reasons, Fisher responded that:

The least of the reasons that we advanced in opposition to the employment of coloured labour was its effect on industrial conditions. We pointed out that the real danger which it involved was the racial one.⁴²

This is partially true, but clearly the labour issue was at the heart of Labor concerns. Nevertheless, both Fisher and Cook reaffirmed their White Australian credentials, taking what was then regarded as the 'politically correct' point of view.

The role of party politics has not been sufficiently explored in the literature on White Australia. Verity Burgmann, for example, is critical of the contrast drawn by J. A. La Nauze, in his 1965 biography of Alfred Deakin, between 'the bigotry of the working class on the one hand, and the more refined and unprejudiced views of Deakin, the representative of middle-class liberalism, on the other.' She favours the Labor approach on the grounds that at least they avoided the hypocrisy of Deakin by being 'more honest' and 'directly racist'.⁴³ She discusses the different methods put forward for achieving immigration restriction. Deakin favoured the 'indirect' dictation test, whereby 'coloured' immigrants would be excluded by a test in any European language. This method was intended to avoid the appearance of 'racial' discrimination. In contrast, the Labor Party favoured the outright exclusion of Asians and Africans.⁴⁴

There are some difficulties associated with Burgmann's interpretation of this issue. The suggestion that degrees of racism can be assigned according to class appears to support the theory that racism, like class, is economically determined. Burgmann herself has rejected this theory. The division between White Australians and anti-White Australians is more usefully discussed as an ideological stance in its own right, which preceded both political and class divisions. Furthermore, Burgmann's comparison between Deakin and Fisher leaves aside the more important question of the outright opposition to the policy by the Free-traders.⁴⁵

⁴²*Ibid.*

⁴³Burgmann, 'Writing Racism out of History', pp. 88-89.

⁴⁴Stuart Macintyre, *The Oxford History of Australia, Volume 4 1901-1942 The Succeeding Age*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1986, p. 89.

⁴⁵As discussed in Chapter two.

Labour legislation

The conflict between Liberal and Labor on the White Australia issue became most apparent in regard to labour policy. The assumption in 1901 was that industries which had previously relied on 'coloured' labour would make the change over to white labour. In the sugar industry, a bounty system offered a rebate of £2 per ton for sugar produced with European labour.⁴⁶ Despite government incentives, the sugar growers were reluctant to employ white labour. According to Doug Hunt, as little as 30.8 per cent of sugar produced in the Wide Bay district in 1904 was harvested by white labour.⁴⁷ With both white and 'coloured' workers employed in the industry, labour policy became increasingly segregationist. In 1905, the Queensland parliament passed the Shearers' and Sugar Workers' Accommodation Act, which prescribed food and accommodation standards for European employees and stipulated that 'Asiatics' were not permitted to house and eat with Europeans.⁴⁸ The feeling was that white labour would refuse to take on the work if they were not treated as white men. According to Hunt's account conditions improved as an 'homogeneous European workforce emerged.' Hunt notes, however, that for the Sugar Workers' Union there was 'no question of union brotherhood embracing non-European workers.' He wrote: 'The intention of Australian workers was clear: only whites were privileged to labour under the north Queensland sun.'⁴⁹

A similar message had been sent during the first sitting of the Commonwealth parliament in the passing of Act 12 of 1901. This act stipulated that vessels carrying Australian mails would be obliged to carry only white crew. Robert Huttenback describes this as 'the first pillar of the legal arch to support 'White Australia'.⁵⁰ Ann Curthoys discussed the background to this legislation in her article on the 1878 Seamen's strike over the issue of 'coloured' competition.⁵¹ Even so, it is misleading to describe this as the 'first pillar', given that the legislation was only partially upheld.

⁴⁶A. Birch, 'The Implementation of the White Australia Policy in the Queensland Sugar Industry 1901-1912' *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, Volume 11, no. 2, August 1965, pp. 198-210.

⁴⁷Hunt, 'Exclusivism and Unionism', p. 88.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, p. 91.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, pp. 93-4.

⁵⁰Robert Huttenback, *Racism and Empire: White Settlers and Colored Immigrants in the British Self-Governing Colonies 1830-1910*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1976, p. 279.

⁵¹Ann Curthoys, 'Conflict and Consensus', in *Who Are Our Enemies?*, pp. 49-65.

Burns Philp, for example, had a contract to carry mails and yet they were able to obtain an exemption from the white labour stipulation.⁵²

When the Fisher Labor government came into power in 1910, unionists renewed their demands for the exclusion of 'coloured' residents from employment. Prime Minister Fisher, being an undisputed proponent of White Australia, granted 'absolute preference' to unionists. The connection between White Australia legislation on the one hand, and Conciliation and Arbitration legislation on the other, needs to be emphasised. An important aspect of this new labour policy was to ensure that 'coloured' workers were sacked and replaced with European labour.⁵³ The fact that this was termed 'preference to unionists' was merely proof that the racial stereotype of 'coloured' labour as 'cheap' and therefore non-union was intrinsic to Labor thinking.

In 1914, after a Liberal victory, Prime Minister Cook demonstrated his opposition to this new policy. In the case of the sugar industry, Cook granted Exemption Certificates to Japanese residents in Queensland, arguing that long term residents were entitled to earn a living, and that they could not be regarded as cheap labour. On Fisher's re-election in 1914, however, unionists demanded that these exemptions be cancelled.⁵⁴ This enforcement of white-only labour became the new focus of Labor's White Australia policy. Many previous supporters of the policy regarded this step as extremist and the term 'rabid White Australian' was coined for those who single-mindedly pursued this goal. It becomes necessary after 1914 to distinguish between White Australians who remained nationalists but sought to include a humanist agenda in their sense of nationalism and more extreme White Australians who relentlessly pursued the strictly white-only goal.

Those nationalists who challenged this aspect of White Australia did not necessarily put forward an anti-racist agenda. Such a term is anachronistic when used in the context of pre-war Australia as theories of racial hierarchy were still widely accepted. Nevertheless, it was based on a sense of common citizenship: that all Australian residents must be granted the basic right of employment. Ironically, the nationalists were endangering their own ideals when they discriminated against 'coloured' people who in

⁵²NTPLA, Deputation to Minister for Home Affairs, 22 February 1932, A1/15 1934/3449, National Archives of Australia, ACT (AA ACT).

⁵³Prime Minister Cook's request for a Double Dissolution, 4 June 1914, MS 2919/3/423; Summary of the Legislation Passed by the Labour Government in the Commonwealth, MS 2919/3/408, p.16, Fisher Papers, National Library of Australia (NLA).

⁵⁴Cook to Acting Premier, QLD, 14 May 1914, MS 2919/3/279-281; Fisher letters, 1915, MS 2919/3/282-5, Fisher Papers, NLA.

many cases were Australian citizens. The internationalist perspective of the Industrial Workers of the World will be considered in chapter four.

Pragmatic considerations, such as international pressures and fear of offending Japan continued to be driving forces against the new phase of White Australia. In a secret and urgent message to the Premier of Queensland in 1914, Fisher advised him not to remove Japanese workers while the Japanese Naval Squadron lay anchored off our shores. The dangers of extreme 'racial' discrimination were apparent to Fisher, even if others, namely William Morris Hughes, remained relentlessly jingoistic.⁵⁵

Important debates over White Australia's labour policy took place, not merely in parliament, but also at the annual meetings of the powerful Australian Workers' Union (AWU). In 1910, they discussed the issue of continued competition from 'coloured' workers. Some members were doubtful as to the validity of excluding those 'Asiatics' who were born in Australia or who had previously been union members.⁵⁶ Some delegates suggested that to exclude them would be detrimental to worker unity in Australia. These very reasonable arguments were rejected. One can only conclude that the unstated agenda for some AWU leaders was 'racial' segregation at all costs. Such was the xenophobia of some executive members that they were prepared to risk internal conflict within the union executive and a divided and therefore weakened labour force. It is nevertheless important to recognise that this xenophobia was not uniform within the AWU. The key protagonists at these meetings can be identified as being Dunstan from South Australia (who later moved to Queensland) and Rae, delegates from New South Wales. Any debate which threatened the White Australian line was quickly and forcefully stifled by these two.

The exploitation of Aboriginal workers as 'cheap' labour was also raised, at the AWU conference. According to Hearn and Knowles, in their history of the AWU, Aboriginal workers had been admitted to membership on payment of a slightly discounted fee following a decision at the 1891 conference. The AWU distinguished Aboriginal people from other 'coloured' workers on the grounds that they were 'native' to Australia.⁵⁷ In 1895, AWU rules had permitted membership of 'Maoris, Negroes,

⁵⁵Prime Minister Fisher to Premier of Queensland, 12 June 1915, Fisher Papers, 2919/3/282, NLA, Canberra.

⁵⁶Johnson of the Central NSW Branch suggested limited 'Asiatic' membership. AWU 24th Annual Conference, 1910, p.39, E154/17, AWU Deposit, Noel Butlin Archives Centre, Australian National University, (NBAC, ANU).

⁵⁷Mark Hearn and Harry Knowles, *One Big Union, A History of the Australian Workers Union 1886-1994*, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, 1996, pp. 66-7.

Aborigines and the children of mixed marriages'.⁵⁸ By 1910, however, Aborigines were no longer specifically mentioned as it was assumed that the exclusion of 'coloured aliens' did not apply to Aboriginal members.⁵⁹

The AWU President, Spence insisted that the union did not harbour 'any competitive fear of the natives' despite objections which had been raised by the Western Australian Branch. He stated that the 'rule of the Union allowed natives to become members, and all they wanted to see was fair treatment to those who could not help themselves'.⁶⁰ Andrew Markus pointed out that the AWU membership had deleted any reference to Aboriginal workers in 1903, thus making the rules open to interpretation. The assumption was that they were not excluded because they did not fall into the 'coloured aliens' category.⁶¹ Despite the position taken by Spence in 1910, in practice many unions, including the Darwin AWU, excluded Aboriginal workers. A more precise survey of which unions excluded Aboriginal workers is yet to be undertaken making it difficult to gauge the extent of this practice. Where the exclusion existed, however, unionists spoke of Aboriginal labour in the same language as other 'coloured' labour, that is, in terms of their threat to white workers and White Australia.

White Labour for Port Darwin.

The examination of White Australian attitudes in the national public arena gives us a sense of the debate at the official level. But one cannot assume that the politicians and union executives reflected the attitudes of their constituents. By considering this debate at a local level, in the community of Port Darwin, it is possible to provide a more nuanced portrait of White Australia. Port Darwin is an ideal choice for this project: the community was small and intimately interconnected, which provides ample material for micro-history. The town, with a majority of workers being 'coloured' was at the very heart of the debate over 'coloured' labour. Far from being a peripheral anomaly, being directly governed by the federal parliament, it was at the centre of federal government activity in relation to the implementation of the white labour policy. Speaking in the House of Representatives in 1901, Bruce Smith pointed out that the 'loudest and most

⁵⁸Markus, *Fear and Hatred, Purifying Australia and California, 1850-1901*, Hale & Iremonger, Sydney, 1979, p. 175.

⁵⁹AWU Annual Convention, 1914, p. 35, NBAC, ANU; Hearn and Knowles, *One Big Union*, pp. 66-7.

⁶⁰AWU Annual Conference, 1910, p.72, NBAC, ANU.

⁶¹Andrew Markus, 'Talka Longa Mouth: Aborigines and the Labour Movement, 1890-1970', in Ann Curthoys and Andrew Markus (eds.) *Who Are Our Enemies?* p. 141.

hysterical cries' over White Australia had been in regard to the Northern Territory. He himself did not regard the situation as critical given that only 550 extra Chinese had arrived in the previous five years, but the Labor Party was determined to make an example of Australia's northern gateway.⁶²

When Labor Prime Minister, Andrew Fisher took office in April 1910 it was a decisive win for Labor in both Houses. During their administration, they passed the *Northern Territory Acceptance Act* and the *Northern Territory Administration Act* 1910.⁶³ Increasing federal power over industrial arbitration, they also passed the *Conciliation and Arbitration Acts* of 1910 and 1911.⁶⁴ When the federal government took over administration of the Northern Territory, it did so in the knowledge that it was taking on South Australia's financial debts. Nevertheless, economic concerns were barely considered in the vast array of reports commissioned by the federal government. The dominant question was how the White Australia policy could be applied to the Territory.⁶⁵ The feeling at the time was that the economic consequences of shifting from 'cheap coloured' to a white only workforce, would be only temporary and that such sacrifice was worthwhile if the goals of White Australia were to be achieved. A government report argued that 'the very existence of a white Australia' depended upon the colonisation of the Territory.⁶⁶ Alfred Deakin, who whole-heartedly supported the Bill, emphasised that this was a matter of national security and that commercial considerations were not significant.⁶⁷

If ever the Australian nation attempted to engage in social engineering, then the federal take-over of the Northern Territory in 1910 was the classic example. Port Darwin, as the administrative centre of the Territory was the site of what Grenfell Price described as the 'first effort of the Europeans in a southern continent to develop by white labour their own tropical zone' and was 'the greatest biological experiment in history'.⁶⁸ The census figures for 1911 gave Darwin's population as 1387, including 442 Chinese, 374 Europeans, 247 'full-blood Aborigines', with the rest being

⁶²Gizen-No-Teki, *Colorphobia*, pp. 129-130.

⁶³Sawyer, *Australian Federal Politics*, p. 92.

⁶⁴*Ibid.*, p. 96.

⁶⁵'Commonwealth policy on the Northern Territory', 1 January 1911, Fisher Papers, MS 2919/3/462, NLA.

⁶⁶'Colonising the Northern Territory of Australia', Submitted to Minister for External Affairs, 11 August 1911, A1/15 11/15258, AA ACT. Given that tropical settlement was regarded as problematic, Southern Europeans were considered as an alternative to British immigrants. One suggestion was to pay for the passages of Galician peasants from Spain who were described as being hard-working and thrifty. Director, Immigration and Tourist Bureau, Sydney to Department of External Affairs, Melbourne, 1 March 1912, A1/15 12/4293, AA ACT.

⁶⁷David Walker, *Anxious Nation*, p. 122.

⁶⁸Grenfell Price, *The History and Problems*, p. 56.

Japanese, Filipino, 'half-caste' Aboriginal and Timorese.⁶⁹ A regiment of officials and experts was sent to Darwin to administer the project.

Both Prime Minister Fisher and Billy Hughes were originally executive members of the Waterside Workers' Federation and thus it is not surprising that their first area of action was the waterfront.⁷⁰ The hiring practices at Port Darwin had been brought to the attention of the federal government in 1908. McDougall questioned Deakin on a *Bulletin* article, stating that Northern Territory shipping agents were 'employing Chinamen in lieu of whites to unload and sort cargoes.' McDougall asked how the government could guarantee that 'Asiatics and opium' were not coming into the Commonwealth 'at ports where Chinamen are being employed.'⁷¹ These issues were addressed in 1911 when the federal government ordered the replacement of Chinese 'coolies' with European waterside workers.⁷²

Darwin's Chinese community protested to the Minister for External Affairs, stating:

It is stipulated in inviting tenders for contracts that the work must be performed by European labor if available. This shuts up avenues of employment formerly open to Chinese. Many Chinese coolies until recently found employment as wharf laborers, but now the ship's agents inform us that European labor must be employed...⁷³

The fact that many Chinese were left unemployed and without means of support did not concern the government in Melbourne.

Ironically, as white unionists began to organise, it was they who gave the Fisher government pause. From the beginning, the transition to white labour did not go as the government had planned. Official sanction had been given to the white only labour policy, but the administration was not prepared for the strength of union action that would accompany this policy.

The tenor of White Australian unionist attitudes in Darwin in 1910 is amply demonstrated in the electoral advertisement of Labor candidate W. J. Bournes. He described himself as a White Australian and called for 'Asiatics be excluded from all branches of the Government service, contracts and

⁶⁹Census figures for Darwin, 1911, A1/15 11/16191, AA ACT.

⁷⁰Margo Beasley, *Wharfies, A History of the Waterside Workers' Federation of Australia*, Halstead Press, Rushcutters Bay, NSW, 1996, pp. 22-24.

⁷¹CPD, 3rd Parliament, 3rd Session, Volume 47, 1908, p. 542.

⁷²F. A. Alcorta, 'The Origins of Trade Unionism in the Northern Territory', *Labour History*, no. 43, November 1982, pp. 32-5.

⁷³Chinese business community of Darwin to J. Thomas, Minister for External Affairs, 7 May 1912, A1/15 1912/10547, AA ACT.

mining industry'. He further called for the 'Asiatic children' to be placed in separate schools.⁷⁴ Bournes was unabashedly prejudiced against 'Asiatics', confident that his call for segregation would win him support with the electorate. His assumption that Darwin voters would respond to an overt White Australian platform was incorrect. He was virtually ignored by the voters at the election and the previous Labor candidate, whose platform said nothing on the issue, was returned.

After his failed attempt to enter politics, Bournes took part in the formation of a Darwin branch of the Amalgamated Workers' Association of North Queensland, which was affiliated to Townsville.⁷⁵ The first meeting was held in March 1912 with 40 members present. Alf Lee and Bournes led the discussion regarding proposed demands for higher waterside worker rates. The enemy was clearly perceived to be the anonymous 'Asiatics' who were currently acting as waterside workers. The new union proposed to strike for higher wages and warned the stevedores: 'That in the event of any steamer being worked by Asiatics, southern unions be advised not to unload such vessel on her return to southern ports.'⁷⁶ The shipping agents offered to pay the waterside workers the Cairns rate of pay. When the union rejected their offer, the agents went ahead and employed Chinese workers.⁷⁷

Labor administration favours 'coloured' workers?

As the strike continued, the division between unionists and the Labor administration became clear. When the unionists waited on the Labor Administrator, Dr. Gilruth, he adamantly refused to grant preference to unionists, and took steps to break the strike.⁷⁸ According to the *Brisbane Courier*,

the clerical staff of the Federal Socialist Government was organised into a gang of 'scabs and blacklegs' and they set to work to get the cargo out.

⁷⁴*Northern Territory Times*, 18 March 1910.

⁷⁵At a later date the union was referred to as the A.W.A. — the Australian Workers' Association. Those present were E. Jennings, J. Finnegan, V. C. Barry, M. Presley, A. Kost, C. Osborne, D. Clohesy, W. Tatlock, Alf Lee, C. Flynn, H. Ray, C. McGregor, D. McInerney, and G. Elmer. *Northern Territory Times*, 29 December 1911.

⁷⁶'Workers' Union', *Northern Territory Times*, 22 March 1912, W. H. J. Pennell was the Secretary of the A.W.A. The shipping agents were P. Kelsey of A. E. Jolly & Co. for Burns Philp Line, Walter Bell & Co. for C. N. Line, E. V. V. Brown, for E. & A. SS Line.

⁷⁷'Darwin Labour Troubles', *Northern Territory Times*, 29 March 1912. Unionists Bournes, Lee, Pennell, Presley and Reardon had asked for rates of 2 shillings per hour, and 3 and 4 shilling for overtime.

⁷⁸Unionists in favour of strike action were Charles O'Malley, Leo Stanley Riley, Henry Douglas, Joseph Gaynor, Alexander McKay Bethune, Alfred Pain, Thomas James White, see *Northern Territory Times*, 22 May 1913.

... The companions and co-workers of the strike breakers are a gang of natives from the Aboriginal Department — no doubt pressed into the service — and the Javanese crew of the Van Linschoten.⁷⁹

The *Courier* described the Fisher government as the 'father of a delightful gang of white, black and yellow strike breakers' and asked: 'Who is now smashing the policy which Mr. Fisher brags about?' From the perspective of parliament, Fisher was the champion of White Australia, but a very different picture emerged from this incident.

The Administration was not only working against the union, but was also revealed to be supportive of 'cheap' Aboriginal labour. Their decision to use Aboriginal labour on the wharf suggested that the Labor government accepted the continued exploitation of the Aboriginal people. This was in complete contradiction of AWU official policy as described by Spence in 1910.

Baldwin Spencer, anthropologist and professor of Biology at Melbourne University, had been appointed to study Aboriginal society in the Territory. He had no particular sympathy for the labour movement.⁸⁰ He condoned the employment of Aboriginal wharfies and described the workers who had assisted in unloading the steamers as 'twelve stalwart aboriginals' implying that they were well suited to the task. When the white wharfies went on strike, it was he who organised ten Aboriginal workers to load sixty-three tons of coal into trucks outside Darwin. Spencer describes them loading coal onto the steamer well into the night until they could work no longer, 'laughing and cheerful the whole time'.⁸¹ This racial stereotype of 'cheerful' workers is reminiscent of the Deep South descriptions of African slaves happy and singing as they toiled. It is difficult to explain how Spencer could possibly have represented the Fisher government in Darwin, given that he had no affinity with their White Australian agenda.

The Aboriginal workers in question belonged to several different clans. Darwin was Larrakeya country but was also home to groups such as the Woolna and others from the Daly and Alligator river areas. Under the new administration, however, their separate camps had been moved together to Kahlin Beach close to the centre of town. This enforced grouping provided the administration with easy access to workers. The Department of Aboriginal Affairs, comfortable with the notion of 'cheap' Aboriginal labour,

⁷⁹J. Knight and R. S. Browne, 'The Comic Opera Strike', *Brisbane Courier*, 8 May 1913.

⁸⁰Alan Powell, *Far Country: A Short History of the Northern Territory*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, 1982, p. 135.

⁸¹Gordon Reid, *A Picnic with the Natives, Aboriginal-European Relations in the Northern Territory to 1910*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, 1990, p.192.

reported that Aboriginal 'rouseabouts' in Darwin were paid 2 shillings per week with food and clothes, and that they gave 'ample value for money'.⁸² By way of comparison, these wages should be contrasted with the rate of 2 shillings per hour being demanded by the striking wharfies.⁸³ There is no way that their employment conditions could be reconciled with the official AWU position.

While the *Courier* blamed the Fisher government for this betrayal of White Australia perhaps the source was the officials in Darwin. Like Spencer, Administrator, Dr. Gilruth, was a professor at Melbourne University, his specialty being Veterinary Pathology.⁸⁴ While Gilruth undoubtedly supported White Australia in some aspects, he was also antagonistic towards the union movement. Dunstan, speaking at the 1916 AWU Annual Conference, stated:

Dr. Gilruth was appointed by a Government with White Australian ideals, yet Dr. Gilruth had employed from the start, and continued to employ, Chinese, Japs [sic], or Malays doing the domestic work about Government House. Dr. Jensen, the Government geologist, however, had consistently refused to employ anyone but white domestic workers in his household, which could not be said of other Government officials, who staffed their households with colored aliens.⁸⁵

He concluded that the Labor officials were 'altogether out of harmony with the Government policy'.⁸⁶ Gilruth was finally removed from office during the union-led Darwin Rebellion of 1919.⁸⁷ A later Royal Commission found him guilty of disloyalty to White Australia.

It is difficult to judge how many shared Gilruth's doubts. When Josiah Thomas, the Minister for External Affairs, travelled to Darwin in 1912, he was dubious about the possibility of enforcing White Australia in the north. In a private letter to the Atlee Hunt, Secretary of the Department of External Affairs, Baldwin Spencer commented that the parliamentary party had seen the labour difficulties in Darwin and that 'even the most

⁸²J. T. Beckett to Dr. H. Basedow, 29 July 1911; R. Burston and M. Holmes, 'General Report on the Aborigines camped in the immediate neighbourhood of Darwin', 27 July 1911, A1/15 1912/10964, AA ACT.

⁸³*Northern Territory Times*, 29 March 1912.

⁸⁴Powell, *Far Country*, p. 144.

⁸⁵Official Report of the 13th Annual Convention, January, 1916, p.61, AWU Deposit, E154/17, NBAC, ANU.

⁸⁶*Ibid.*, p. 62

⁸⁷Powell, *Far Country*, p. 159.

rabid "White Australians" amongst them are beginning to wonder whether the Northern Territory can be opened up by white labour'.⁸⁸ As for the Minister, Spencer thought that he would have preferred to be working under a non-labour government, implying that Labor had set themselves an impossible task in insisting that a white-only labour policy be enforced in the Territory. It is doubtful, however, that any of the Labor parliamentarians would have publicly voiced this doubt. According to Gizen-No-Teki, writing in 1903, Labor leaders felt constrained to follow the party line. He wrote:

It is perfectly safe to say that none of the leaders of their party dare utter a word which could be construed into an expression of doubt as to the wisdom of adhering rigidly to the principle of the absolute exclusion of colored aliens. If it occurred to one of them that the fears of threatened invasion of alien competitors were baseless he would either have to keep his opinion to himself, or else give up his position to some one less thoughtful or less honest. If, then, the labor voters make it impossible for their own leaders to enlighten them, from whom are they to learn?⁸⁹

This evidence casts some doubt on the strength of White Australian sentiment within the Labor administration. Ironically, their reluctance to embrace the policy appears to have stemmed from their antipathy towards confrontations with grassroots white unionism. This division within the ranks of Labor makes it all the more necessary to avoid generalisations about 'working-class' racism, or at very least to differentiate between the Labor executive and the grassroots unionists.

The Darwin AWU

After the 1913 strike, Darwin unionists decided to join the AWU.⁹⁰ The union was included in the Queensland Branch and attached to Northern District, under Secretary J. Dash who in turn was under Dunstan as Branch Secretary for Queensland.⁹¹ The union membership rules in Darwin were those of the AWU. They stated that

⁸⁸Baldwin Spencer to Hunt, 7 May 1912, Atlee Hunt Papers, MS 52/1044, NLA.

⁸⁹Gizen-No-Teki, *Colorphobia*, pp. 90-91.

⁹⁰Written 17 July 1913, *Northern Territory Times*, 21 August 1913.

⁹¹Official Report of the 13th Annual Convention, January 1916, p. 60, AWU Deposit, E154/17, NBAC, ANU.

no Chinese, Japanese, Kanakas, or Afghans, or colored aliens other than Maories, American negroes [sic], and issue of mixed parentage born in Australasia shall be admitted to membership. Provided that no fresh applicant claiming admission as the issue of mixed parentage born in Australasia shall be admitted to membership unless he produces a certificate of birth.⁹²

The first organiser for the AWU was Harold Nelson.⁹³ In 1914, the AWU signed on 109 members who were predominantly Irish, Scottish, Russian and Greek.⁹⁴ The Greek and Russian workers had recently arrived to work in the new Vestey's Meat Works. Their arrival was part of a general increase in European migration which the AWU regarded as yet another source of 'competition' intended to 'bring down the standard of living.'⁹⁵ In 1908, Senator Walker, had alluded to the Labor movement's continued opposition to immigration. Addressing those in the Senate who 'believe in a White Australia' he commented that 'what they mean by a White Australia is an Australia for the whites who are already here and for nobody else'.⁹⁶ The suggestion was that Labor was against immigration *per se*, on account of its perceived threat to industrial conditions. The prevalence of newly arrived Russian and Greek workers in the new AWU must have had an effect on general ethos of the Darwin union.

Nevertheless, the Darwin AWU continued to support the White Australia line focusing their attack on Chinese workers. The new secretary, Robert Toupein, held a meeting in 1914, at which it was decided to appeal to the Federated Waterside Workers 'to assist in the fight against the employment of Asiatics, and for a White Australia, by refraining from landing any cargo for Port Darwin.'⁹⁷ They were successful and were granted preference for unionists on the wharf, including the unloading from the ship, a job which had previously been done by the ship's so-called 'coolie' crews.⁹⁸ The AWU established a Permanent Waterside Worker's section and

⁹²Annual Convention, 1914, p. 35, AWU Papers, NBAC, ANU.

⁹³Official Report of Amalgamation Conference, January 6-15, p. 25, E154/15/3; 13th Annual Convention, January 1916, p. 60, E154/17; Annual Convention, 1928, p.49, E154/17, AWU Deposit, NBAC, ANU.

⁹⁴Membership lists for QLD and Darwin District, 1914-15. There were 64 members in Darwin itself, E154/52, AWU Deposit, NBAC, ANU.

⁹⁵AWU Annual Convention, 1914, p. 22, E154/17, NBAC, ANU.

⁹⁶Senator Walker, Senate, CPD, 1908, p. 62.

⁹⁷*Northern Territory Times*, 24 April, 18 June 1914.

⁹⁸Northern Territory, Annual Report for the Year 1914-15, p. 14, DU 392, North Australia Research Unit Library (NARU), Darwin.

set about negotiating an Award wage.⁹⁹ Their success where the previous union had failed is testimony to the powerful connections of the AWU.

Criticism of this 'success' for White Australia came from Gilruth, who reported in his Annual Report of 1914-15 that:

In the month of October, owing to the refusal of the men to handle cargo on the wharf unless white labour was also employed on the ship during discharge, the practice which had been in vogue since the Territory was occupied, namely, that of unloading ships by means of their coolie crews, ceased. The result, naturally, has been a considerable increase in the landed cost of materials, and also delays in discharging the ships ...¹⁰⁰

When the Arbitration Court laid down the first Commonwealth award for waterside workers, Gilruth complained that this was too much as most of the waterside workers did not have families, 'while practically none of the foreign workers — Russian, Maltese, Greeks, &c., have evidently any relatives in Australia'.¹⁰¹ Despite his opposition, by 1916, the AWU had achieved sufficient power in Darwin to set the award wage for Darwin waterside workers at 43 per cent higher than the Sydney award, based on the cost of living in Darwin.¹⁰² In 1917 Darwin was officially recognised as a Branch of the AWU in its own right, with some 1400 members.¹⁰³

European workers

During these years, the composition of the AWU became increasing European as several hundred Greek, Spanish, Italian and Russian immigrants arrived in Darwin. Of these, the Greeks endured the most prejudice from British Australian workers, primarily because of war-time hysteria which highlighted the 'ambiguous position' of Greece in the war.¹⁰⁴ Some unionists referred to Greek workers as Turks, playing on war-time prejudices but others were quick to support Greek unionists.¹⁰⁵ During 1916 and 1917, Greeks and Russians were increasingly depicted as anarchists who had taken jobs that should have gone to British Australians and more

⁹⁹Frank Alcorta, *Darwin Rebellion 1911-1919*, Darwin, NT History Unit, 1984, p. 106.

¹⁰⁰Northern Territory Annual Report, 1914-15, p. 14.

¹⁰¹Annual Report, 1914-15, p. 15.

¹⁰²*Northern Territory Times*, 16 March 1916.

¹⁰³AWU Annual Convention, 1917, p.70, AWU Deposit, E154/17, NBAC, ANU.

¹⁰⁴*Northern Territory Times*, 19 August 1915, 13 July 1916, 17 August 1916.

¹⁰⁵'Greek and Turk Cooks', *Northern Territory Times*, 24 February 1920.

particularly to returned soldiers.¹⁰⁶ Faced with this prejudice, one Russian worker, Rodionoff, responded that

some ignorant, shameless gentlemen feel hatred towards these unfortunate immigrants. Why is it so? Why not deal with them fair and square? For equality and fraternity are the foundations of the happiness and prosperity of a civilised community.¹⁰⁷

This man provided one note of sanity at a time when all were becoming increasingly hostile. As in Queensland, where a strong Russian presence supported IWW activity, in Darwin Russians were similarly internationalist in their outlook.¹⁰⁸

One AWU supporter, who wrote under the pseudonym of TAFF, expressed the vitriolic prejudice of the war years:

'My Country Tis for Thee'

Some people are determined
The N.T. shall be black,
And would, if they were able,
Give all white men the sack.
Such men deserve a flogging,
They're enemies to their race.
I wonder how in war time
They dare to show their face.

In Darwin there are many
Employ the hated 'Chink',
They care not for the Empire,
But to hear their money clink.
The Greek and Patagonian,
And Malays by the score,
For filth and immorality —
Well, I'll not say any more ...¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁶*Northern Territory Times*, 9 November, 30 November 1916, 22 March 1917.

¹⁰⁷*Northern Territory Times*, 22 June 1918.

¹⁰⁸Russians were prominent in both the Brisbane Red Flag riots of 1919 and the Darwin Rebellion of 1919, a similarity which invites further study to compare these two events. Raymond Evans, *The Red Flag Riots*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1988, p. 4.

¹⁰⁹*Northern Territory Times*, 10 August 1916.

Towards the end of the First World War, European immigrant workers were increasingly regarded as competition for British Australians.¹¹⁰ This attitude was translated into official action in 1920 after the closing of the Vestey's Meat Works which had been the main employer of labour.¹¹¹ All but the subsidised shipping lines ceased to call at Port Darwin, and with so little work, the permanent wharf gangs were replaced with casual labour. Newspaper commentators were increasingly hostile to foreign labour, one, named 'Heila' writing:

It is not the black man, or even the Chow [sic], that we Australians have to dread, as he does not compete with us in the same sense as the starving scum of Europe when he is dumped here in any quantity.¹¹²

The administration responded to this surge in anti-European sentiment by offering 216 free passages out of Darwin for Greek, Patagonian and Spanish emigrants. The Acting Administrator and ex-Senator Staniford Smith, argued that 'by getting away these coloured and other aliens, whatever work was available was conserved for the British and Australians.'¹¹³ In Britain at this time, the government was similarly engaged in systematic repatriation of Black sailors from ports across the country, following riots in 1919. It would appear that post-war social disruptions were not particular to Darwin, nor even to Australia.¹¹⁴

Conclusion

The notion of 'cheap coloured' labour was a central theme in White Australian discourse, particularly as expressed by members of the Labor Party. In debating the form of the ideal Australian nation, the Labor Party imagined a 'workers' paradise' in which white workers would be free from 'coloured' competition. White Australia's immigration policy may have attracted broad consensus, but the white labour policy was strongly opposed. In order to convince their Protectionist and Free-trader opponents that this

¹¹⁰Doug Hunt also notes the extension of exclusivism to non-British European workers in the 1920s, 'Exclusivism and Unionism', p. 94.

¹¹¹*Northern Territory Times*, 9 November 1916.

¹¹²'The Industrial Outlook', *Northern Territory Times*, 24 January 1920.

¹¹³Annual Report of the Northern Territory, 1919-20, pp. 4 and 17, NARU.

¹¹⁴Panikos Panayi, *Immigration, Ethnicity and Racism in Britain, 1815-1945*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1994, p. 107.

was the moral choice, Labor members held up the example of the American civil war, warning of dire consequences if the nation were to permit the continuance of slavery in its northern regions.

Despite the rhetoric of White Australian senators in 1901, the actual implementation of White Australia's labour policy was, from the beginning, fraught with conflict. Labor unionists in Darwin were initially full of enthusiasm for the project, but were soon confronted by a pragmatic Labor government which continued to support the exploitation of Aboriginal labour. As unionists came to appreciate the character of Darwin's multi-ethnic workforce, they began to reconsider the 'racial' stereotypes on which the white labour policy had been founded. Even the strongest advocates of white labour, the AWU, were forced to debate their policies in the face of internal criticisms. At no time, outside parliamentary speeches, is the discourse of white labour presented as unproblematic. As will be seen in the following chapters, these doubts were reflected in the strength of opposing voices, from both left and right, advocating a multi-ethnic rather than a white workforce.

Chapter four

Internationalism and the Colour Bar

This chapter considers the role of left-wing ideology in shaping attitudes towards 'coloured' labour. By regarding all workers as united, internationalists rejected the notion of 'coloured' labour as being inherently cheap. This chapter examines the communist 'anti-racist' lobby and contrasts their views with those of Labor unionists. Despite the tendency for historians to present Labor and communist as diametrically opposed on the issue of White Australia, this chapter will question such a clear-cut dichotomy. The first section deals with the general debate at a national level, while the second concentrates on the Darwin experience of internationalism.

Internationalist challenges

According to David Johanson, 'the White Australia policy received incidental and temporary publicity during a struggle between the right and left wings of the Labor movement' in the late 1920s. He described the affiliation of the Australasian Council of Trade Unions with the communist-backed Pan-Pacific Trade Union secretariat. The Pan-Pacific secretariat rejected the White Australia policy outright as being 'viciously anti-working class', by pitting worker against worker.¹ Their internationalist stance stood for 'the unity of workers of all lands, irrespective of nationality, colour or creed, for a United Struggle against capitalism and imperialist war'.² To characterise the debate between the left and right wings of the labour movement as 'incidental and temporary', however, is to play down the sustained critique of White Australia by left-wing internationalists. This chapter concentrates on the years 1913 to 1940, beginning with the anti-racist lobby of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) and finishing with the

¹David Johanson, 'History of the White Australia Policy', in Kenneth Rivett (ed.), *The Immigration Reform Group, Immigration: Control or Colour Bar?*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, 1962, p. 24.

²Carlotta J. Ellis, *Why Does the A.L.P. Support the 'White Australia' Policy? (1855-1940)*, M.A. thesis, University of Melbourne, 1950, p. 81.

communist take-over of the North Australian Workers' Union (NAWU) in 1940.

Internationalism in Australia did not begin with the IWW. According to Graeme Osborne, one of the first bodies to support internationalism was the Victorian Socialist Party (VSP) founded in 1905. The VSP opposed racism, believing that 'racial tolerance' was essential for internationalism. This stance set them apart from the orthodox labour movement.³ A VSP spokesperson, Amelia Lambrick, said that Australian socialists though

quick to recognise the nature and beauty of brotherhood ... are often slow to realise what it involves. ... We shout "Brotherhood" in the major and "White Australia" in the minor and seem quite unconscious of the discord...⁴

Lambrick advocated opening up Australia's empty spaces to Asian settlement. She was supported in this by poet Bernard O'Dowd. In 1912, O'Dowd questioned the assumption that European cultures were superior and argued that socialists should recruit Asians into the Party 'to forge links with "advanced bodies" in Asian countries.'⁵ He had been an outspoken critic of racism in the labour movement since the 1890s, arguing that: 'Pure democracy is colour-blind'.⁶ Despite these early signs of internationalism, however, Osborne notes that by 1915, the *Socialist* was publishing racist material and claiming to share the labour movement's desire to 'maintain racial purity'.⁷

According to Verity Burgmann, the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) 'issued the first effective challenge ever to working-class racism in Australia'.⁸ Their policy on 'coloured' labour set them in direct opposition to right-wing unionists. In 1915, for example, when right-wing unionists were calling for a boycott of Japanese labour in Queensland sugar mills, T. Healy of the IWW defended their right to work. Writing in the IWW newspaper, *Direct Action*, he argued that as long-term residents, they were entitled to earn a living. Ironically this view was supported by Joseph Cook,

³Graeme Osborne, 'A Socialist Dilemma', in A. Curthoys and A. Markus (eds.), *Who Are Our Enemies? Racism and the Australian Working Class*, Hale & Iremonger, ASSLH, Sydney, 1978, p. 112.

⁴*Ibid.* p. 114.

⁵*Ibid.* p. 119.

⁶Cited in Frank Bongiorno, 'Bernard O'Dowd and the 'Problem' of Race', in Robert Hood and Ray Markey (eds.), *Labour and Community, Proceedings of the Sixth National Conference of the ASSLH*, ASSLH, Illawarra Branch, Department of Economics, University of Wollongong, 1999, p. 33.

⁷Osborne, 'A Socialist Dilemma', p. 121.

⁸The IWW originated in Chicago, USA. Verity Burgmann, *Revolutionary Industrial Unionism, The Industrial Workers of the World in Australia*, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, 1995, p. 91.

the new Liberal Prime Minister.⁹ This support for 'coloured' workers was not necessarily anti-racist in character. IWW members, like the Labor unionists, were concerned over the issue of 'cheap' competition, but they believed that the only solution was '[c]lass organisation, irrespective of colour or creed.'¹⁰

Another correspondent for *Direct Action* argued that the White Australia policy was futile while Australia continued to buy goods from Japan, stating: 'Japanese competition in the labour market is just as much a reality now as if factories were established throughout Australia in which none but Japanese were employed.' The correspondent wrote:

Contact with a more advanced race might prompt Japanese workers in this country to demand an equal standard of living; exploitation, therefore, becomes more easy in their native country where working class organisation and aspiration to a higher social standard are practically non-existent.¹¹

The notion that Australians belonged to a more 'advanced' race was clearly part of IWW logic, as was the assumption that Australian workers were necessarily more organised than Asian workers. The IWW may have represented the most progressive labour position in 1915, but they remained eurocentric in their outlook. Unlike early socialist O'Dowd, IWW rhetoric implied a belief in European superiority.

A. E. Brown, writing for *Direct Action* in 1916, similarly criticised White Australia, calling it one of 'the quaint delusions' of craft unionism, and arguing that 'there never has been a truly "white Australia" (except on paper), and there never will be.' Brown described the policy as a 'vote-securing catch-cry' whose parochial outlook was in sharp contrast to the 'world-outlook of Karl Marx, when he sent his famous cry ringing down the ages: "Workers of all countries, Unite!!!" Nevertheless, despite his internationalist outlook, Brown was still concerned to protect white worker standards. He believed that industrial organisation would allow unionists to 'check (if necessary) a sudden influx at any time of colored labor not so organised' and to 'secure (by concerted action) the immediate reception of colored workers into the unions of their respective industry.'¹² The

⁹T. Healy, 'Innisfail, N. Q., Doings at the Sugar Mills, *Direct Action*, 23 October 1915.

¹⁰T. G., 'White Australia in Theory and Practice', *Direct Action*, 13 November 1915.

¹¹*Ibid.*

¹²A. E. Brown, 'Craft Union Delusions', *Direct Action*, 1 July 1916.

assumption was that 'colored' labour was an inherent threat to Australian standards, but that if properly controlled, that threat could be minimised.

The next phase of Australian internationalism came with the formation of the Australian Communist Party in 1920.¹³ According to Stuart Macintyre, writing in *The Reds*, the effects of the Great War 'split the Labor Party, radicalised the unions and fostered a far greater international awareness in the Australian labour movement'.¹⁴ From the beginning of 1921, the presence of communists at trade union conferences saw a concerted challenge launched against racial discrimination.¹⁵ This challenge followed on directly from IWW precedent. What was different in 1921, however, was that the communists were intent on reforming both the Labor Party and its primary trade union, the Australian Workers' Union (AWU), from within. With such an agenda in place, the annual conference of the AWU was, for the first time, almost overwhelmed by demands for removal of the 'colour bar', that is, the restriction on 'coloured' membership.

In their history of the AWU, Mark Hearn and Harry Knowles acknowledge the dissidence within the AWU on the subject of White Australia in the early 1920s. They comment that AWU commitment to White Australia 'exposed it to the rumblings of internal discontent' and was 'in direct opposition to many militant unions'.¹⁶ In 1921, for example, Pat Walsh, President of the Seamen's Union, stated that his union could not join the AWU as its constitution did not permit Japanese and Chinese to become members. Unlike Walsh, however, the Queensland Branch of the Seamen's Union strongly objected to 'Asiatics' joining and urged Walsh to stand for a White Australia policy.¹⁷

The 1921 annual convention of the AWU debated the issue of 'coloured' membership.¹⁸ Cook, from the New Zealand Branch, put forward the motion that Rule 6, which contained the colour bar, be amended to admit 'colored aliens' into the union. He argued that in New Zealand, Indians were paid at lower rates than white workers, but that '[m]any of them were good, staunch unionists at heart'. Cook commented that he personally 'did not care what color a man was, provided he was a real man

¹³Stuart Macintyre, *The Oxford History of Australia, Volume 4, 1901-1942, The Succeeding Age*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1986, p. 194.

¹⁴Stuart Macintyre, *The Reds*, Allen & Unwin, St Leonards, 1998, p. 14.

¹⁵Frank Farrell, 'International Solidarity?', in *Who Are Our Enemies?*, p. 129.

¹⁶Mark Hearn and Harry Knowles, *One Big Union: A History of the Australian Workers Union 1886-1994*, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, 1996, p. 137.

¹⁷*Northern Standard*, 28 April 1921.

¹⁸Other executive members included Watts, Holloway, T. P. Lyons(SA), Bailey(NSW) and W. J. Dunstan(QLD) 35th Annual Convention, 1921, p. 2, AWU Papers, NBAC, ANU.

and a unionist'.¹⁹ W. J. Dunstan countered that in North Queensland the position was far worse as there were 'thousands of Chinese and Indians' working. The president of the AWU, Arthur Blakeley, backed the Queensland Branch and used his position to ensure that the reformists were quashed.²⁰

Prominent NSW Labor unionists Albert Willis and Jock Garden were expelled from the Labor Party for attempting to introduce reforms.²¹ E. J. Theodore, the Labor premier of Queensland, complained that delegates at the ALP conference, 'enamoured with the proletariat in Russia and the sentiments of the IWW', had their minds 'saturated with ideals and dogmas that did not belong to Australia'.²² Another such reformist was E. J. Holloway who acted as president for the All Australian Congress of Trade Unions (AATU) convened by the Labor Party in June 1921. Holloway spoke of reforming the Labor Party, stating that there had been

lightening changes all over the world, and the programme of the Australian Labor Party was considered by some members as growing obsolete. It was thought that it should be brought up to date and brought into line with modern thought to fit in with the new psychology and the mental revolution which had taken place among the workers throughout the world.²³

Holloway made a direct connection between this need for reform and the influence of the Communist Party, reporting that several delegates had attended the Third International Conference at Moscow.

While the delegates to the 1921 AWU convention had been forced to concede to the White Australian faction, the All-Australian Trades Union conference was dominated by the international faction. Holloway, concluded, somewhat optimistically, that 'the workers of Australia had at last adopted the slogan of Karl Marx: "Workers of the World Unite"', and the conference delegates then sang the 'Red Flag'.²⁴ According to Miriam Dixon, the Trades Hall reds supported the constitution for a One Big Union endorsed by the AWU officials, ignoring their leftist critics, 'who chided

¹⁹One cannot help but ask where women stood in this scenario. Annual Convention, 1921, p. 89.

²⁰Ross McMullin describes the Queensland Branch of the AWU under Dunstan as 'all-powerful'. *The Light on the Hill, The Australian Labor Party, 1891-1991*, Oxford University Press, South Melbourne, 1991, p. 123.

²¹Macintyre, *The Reds*, pp. 16-7.

²²*Ibid.*, p. 50.

²³AATU Conference Report, 1921, p. 3.

²⁴*Ibid.*, p. 39.

them for supporting a constitution which excluded 'Chinese, Japanese, Kanakas, or coloured aliens ...'²⁵ It should be emphasised, however, that the Trades Hall reds came close to achieving their ambitious goal of reforming the AWU along internationalist lines. The volatile debates of the 1921 and 1922 conferences would have made it impossible to predict the outcome and many hopeful internationalists were no doubt convinced that union exclusionism was about to end.

1922 — Australasian Workers' Union

This new-found spirit of internationalism was dealt a severe blow in February 1922 at the inaugural meeting of the Australasian Workers' Union, also referred to as the One Big Union (OBU).²⁶ Communist delegates such as Jock Garden and Willis again optimistically envisaged Australian trade unions organised on OBU principles with communists serving as 'nuclei to provide leadership and direction'.²⁷ Contrary to their hopes, the meeting was a victory for the White Australian faction.

Three main unions sent delegates including 23 AWU delegates: five from the W.I.U. (Coal and Shale Federation) Mining Department, and two from the Waterside Workers' Federation. Arthur Blakeley was once again President, and A. C. Willis (WIU) and F. L. Clifford (WWF) were appointed Vice-Presidents. The principle of the OBU was that by uniting together in one organisation the wage workers would form a broader front to strengthen their bargaining power. In the IWW version this included 'coloured' workers, but in the AWU version, a united workforce meant a united white workforce. In keeping with AWU restrictions the OBU rules retained the membership 'colour bar', but added an important proviso

that the foregoing exceptions may be waived in special circumstances by the authority of Annual Convention upon such Convention being satisfied such person understand and accept the policy of the Union, and that the interest of its members will not be prejudiced by their enrolment.²⁸

²⁵Miriam Dixon, 'The First Communist "United Front" in Australia', *Labour History*, no. 10 May, 1966, p. 27.

²⁶Australasian Workers' Union, Report of Inaugural Convention, 13 February 1922, p. 2, AWU Deposit, E154/19, NBAC, ANU.

²⁷Macintyre, *The Reds*, p. 84.

²⁸Australasian Workers' Union, Inaugural Convention, 1922, p. 4.

This was as close as the AWU came to removing the 'colour bar' in this period.

The debate over the 'colour bar' was heated. Morris of the WWF confirmed that his members had boycotted 'aliens' at Newcastle and was critical of the Seamen's Union for 'asking that aliens should be allowed into the O.B.U.'²⁹ Willis, however, argued that the clause excluding 'coloured aliens', 'challenged the international movement of the world' and that they should remember that 'whilst they were in industries they were an industrial menace if not organised'.³⁰ Despite the objections of Blakeley, Willis continued arguing that:

It was, however, no use closing their eyes to the fact that colored people could not be kept out altogether, and that they were here already, and that whilst they were here the logical thing was to educate them to the ways of Unionism.³¹

In seconding the motion from the New Zealand Branch, Knight of the WIU argued that

they had to work on the lines of the class war. These colored people were brought in as the tools of the employers, and it was glaringly inconsistent with the class struggle to exclude the colored races from membership. His Union had decided objections to the colored races' exclusion from membership.³²

Morris, a loyal White Australian, again supported Blakeley against the internationalists arguing that to disagree

would be tantamount to saying they were not in favor of a White Australia, because that was what the ruling involved. It meant admitting Japs [sic] and Chows [sic] and other colored races to the O.B.U. ranks.³³

²⁹*Ibid.*, p. 6.

³⁰*Ibid.*, p. 7.

³¹*Ibid.*, p. 10.

³²Note that most left-wing literature used the spelling 'colored'. *Ibid.*, p. 11.

³³*Ibid.*

Morris was clearly challenging the internationalists to admit their 'disloyalty' to Australia, knowing that such a statement would be controversial.

Clearly the internationalists were not in favour of White Australia in so far as it advocated internal discrimination within Australia, but they were not prepared at this point to admit to disloyalty to Australia's national cause. In any case, as Stuart Macintyre has noted, the CPA policy on White Australia remained 'tortuously qualified'. They denounced the policy for causing working-class disunity, but also rejected 'the importation to Australia of large numbers of coloured workers' and then added the qualification that the threat to employment and wages from cheap labour was colour blind.³⁴

The staunch White Australians in the union movement were adamant in their rejection of the internationalist stance. McNeill of AWU Victoria-Riverina warned 'the O.B.U. scheme would never have gone before A.W.U. members, or if it did it would not have received endorsement with any clause that admitted colored aliens to membership.'³⁵ Lane of the AWU, Queensland similarly argued that the OBU would be jeopardised if they persisted in trying to include 'colored aliens'. Interestingly, Lane stated that he personally thought 'there should be no membership bar against the colored races' but added that 'whatever his own personal views were he must support the opinion as expressed by members'.³⁶ This particular justification was popular with parliamentarians and unionists alike. Indeed, even today the demands of the 'people' are still put forward as justification for discriminatory policies.

The final results of the 1922 AWU vote were 21 in favour of white-only and seven in favour of 'coloured' inclusion. One quarter of the delegates, therefore, were in favour of taking the internationalist line.³⁷ From the tone of the debate, there may well have been others who were sympathetic but who lacked the support of their members or felt obliged to vote with the powerful AWU executive.

Much emphasis has been placed on the role of the communists in fighting to change the overtly racist membership rules, but if we pause to reflect on their arguments, they were not anti-racist. Much like the IWW stance, they favoured unity as a pragmatic solution to 'cheap' competition. There was no appeal to the moral conscience of the unionists. They spoke of

³⁴Macintyre, *The Reds*, pp. 126-7.

³⁵Australasian Workers' Union, Inaugural Convention, 1922, p. 12.

³⁶*Ibid.*

³⁷*Ibid.*

organising 'coloured' workers to prevent them from becoming a menace to white workers. Not one delegate spoke of the effect which the 'colour bar' might have on resident 'coloured' workers whose livelihoods were at stake.

There was an intermediate stance, however, which emerged somewhat tentatively during the debate. Whitford, of the South Australian AWU, suggested that they should **not** 'debar coloured people who were residents of Australia from being members of the organisation.'³⁸ This distinction between 'alien' and 'resident' workers, was an important one. Whitford's suggestion was not internationalist, but rather a moderate form of nationalism, which had been voiced in AWU conventions as early as 1910. Where the internationalists spoke of pragmatic solutions, based on theoretical marxism, these moderate nationalists invoked a moral argument, based on a sense of the ideal nation as egalitarian. Unionists who had worked alongside resident 'coloured' workers were often not prepared to discriminate against those whom they considered to be 'fellow' Australians. These moderate nationalists have been discussed briefly in the previous chapter on White Australians, but they do not rightly belong in either category.

The important qualification to this moderate position was that their supposed generosity of spirit could only be sustained while immigration restriction remained in place. Only then could they regard resident 'coloured' workers as a non-threatening minority group. In this sense, their position was no different from the internationalists who similarly baulked at removing immigration restrictions. The only remaining difference, therefore, between the two, falls back to the question of national sentiment, which the nationalists invoked, and the internationalists apparently rejected.

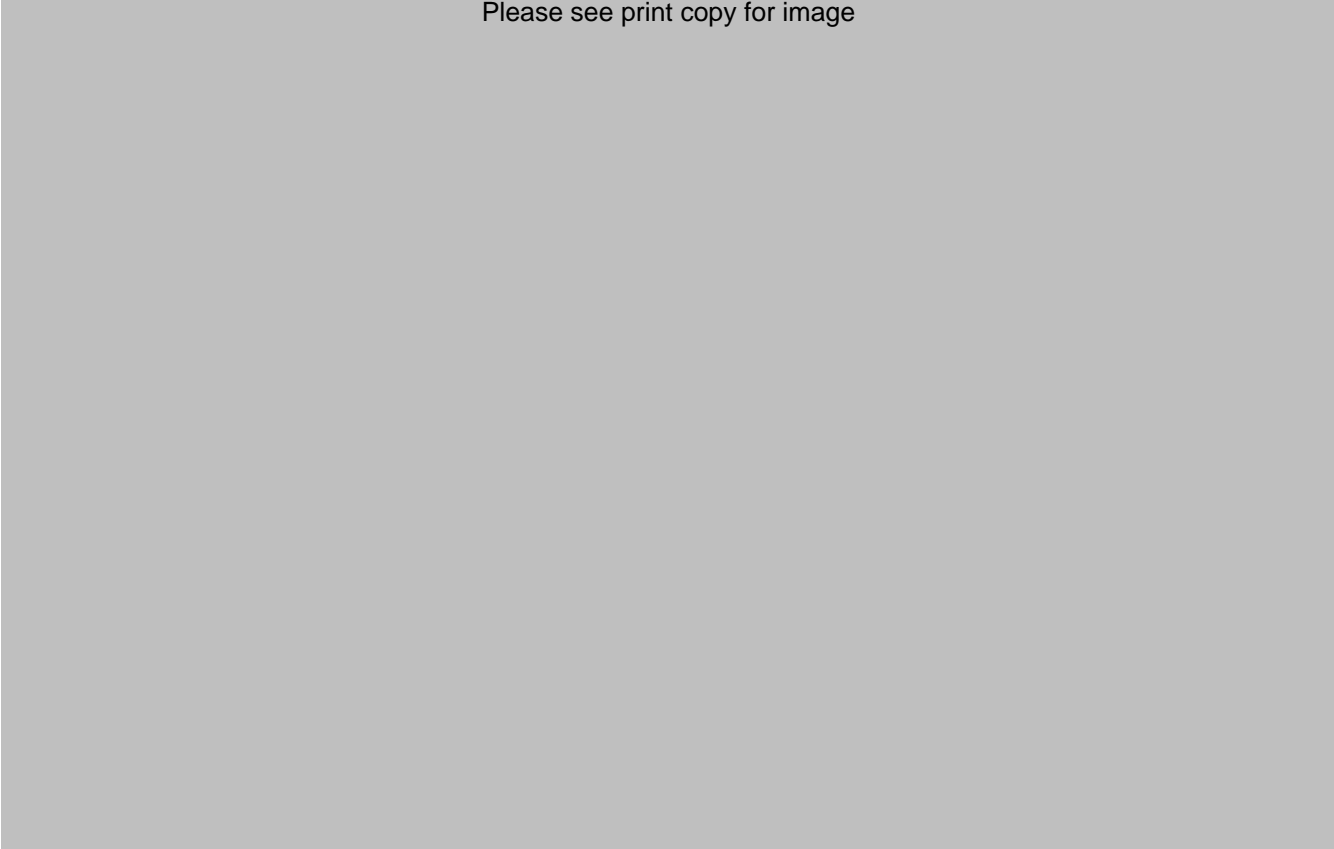
Darwin internationalists — IWW influence

The IWW presence in Darwin was not strong; an IWW local was never formally established. Nevertheless, there is evidence of the influence of IWW ideology, both in regard to the pursuit of direct action tactics and in demonstrations of solidarity with 'coloured' workers. Despite the White Australian beginnings of the Darwin AWA in 1912, by 1913, their president was Chas O'Malley, a member of the IWW. He remained only briefly in Darwin, but on his resignation, he wrote to the Darwin unionists from

³⁸*Ibid.*, p. 11.

Loading wool bales onto S.S. Montoro, Darwin Stokes Hill Wharf
(PH0412/0151, J. A. Austin Collection, Northern Territory Library)

Please see print copy for image



Brisbane, advising them to: 'Keep the Red Flag flying Boys. Never mind the Professional Politician.'³⁹ O'Malley's rhetoric, along with his support for strike action suggests his allegiance to the IWW. I am assuming that he was a member in that, several years later, a Charles O'Malley appears in Queensland records as an IWW syndicalist.⁴⁰

There is insufficient evidence to determine the exact strength of IWWism in Darwin during 1913, but the *Brisbane Courier*, in describing a Darwin waterside workers' strike, commented on the support which the union received from the Chinese workers stating: 'Unlike some white full-flavoured Socialists they stuck to the union. Alas that the only friends of the strikers at Darwin are the Chinese!'⁴¹ The Chinese at least had a sense of internationalism.

According to Verity Burgmann, attempts to form an IWW local in Darwin were made by a Filipino ex-pearler, named Cubillo. In 1915, he sent in the names and subscriptions of nineteen Chinese, Malays, Filipinos, Japanese and Cingalese. The central IWW executive anticipated success in Darwin and organised for their literature to be translated into Chinese.⁴² Apparently they had a change of heart as nothing more was done to organise the Darwin workers. We can only speculate as to why the IWW did not pursue the Darwin local. It is perhaps pertinent to note, however, that of the ten locals in 1916, nine were led by Anglo-Celtic unionists and one by a Russian. There were no locals led by 'coloured' unionists.⁴³ Is it possible that the IWW were sufficiently eurocentric in their perspective that they were unable to imagine 'coloured' workers organising themselves?

The relationship between Darwin unionists and the IWW was problematic from the outset. In 1915 the Darwin AWU found themselves unable to control their waterside workers and decided to abolish the section and relinquish their control of the wharf. Seizing this opportunity, Cubillo approached Alf Pain, an old member of the Darwin AWA who disapproved of the AWU, and asked him to negotiate with the shipping companies on behalf of the 'honorary' IWW members. Pain successfully organised for a gang of 23 Chinese and Filipino, as well as three white workers, to work under the name of the IWW. Before commencing work, he first obtained a

³⁹Written 17 July 1913, *Northern Territory Times*, 21 August 1913; Note O'Malley was President and Leo Riley was Secretary, *Northern Territory Times*, 5 and 12 June 1913. Note this was a particularly turbulent time as the Liberals had just won the federal election and were firmly opposed to union preference, *Northern Territory Times*, 5 June 1913, 17 July, 1913.

⁴⁰Raymond Evans, *The Red Flag Riots*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1988, p. 89.

⁴¹*Brisbane Courier*, 8 May 1913; Tom Barker on 1913 strike, *Northern Territory Times*, 11 November 1915.

⁴²Burgmann, *Revolutionary Industrial Unionism*, p. 90.

⁴³A Russian local was established in Cairns in 1916, T. Healy in *Direct Action*, 15 January 1916.

guarantee from the shipping agents that AWU wages and conditions would be granted to the 'coloured' IWW members. Despite having renounced its control of the wharf, the AWU responded quickly to the threat posed by Pain's workers and demanded to retake control.⁴⁴

The response to this affair from the IWW executive in Sydney was interesting. A distorted version of Pain's actions had reached Tom Barker, the General Secretary of the IWW. He criticised Pain, declaring that he had 'acted as a catspaw for the employers'. Barker sided with the AWU on the matter, stating:

When the I.W.W. goes out to organise the colored workers, it does not go out with the intention of using them to scab on the white workers, neither does it go out upon any sentimental ground of brotherhood. The colored worker is too strong a factor to be ignored.⁴⁵

He argued that 'Asiatic' countries would soon become dominant through cheap labor and modern machinery and that 'scabbery' had become an international business. His solution was to

inculcate the ideas of solidarity, and industrial unionism into the ranks of the workers of the East as well as those of the West. If we don't teach the yellow worker how to raise his standard to ours, then unorganised, he will reduce our standard to his. ... And we are more than convinced, that the Asiatic, once he understands, will be just as solid as the white. Already we have innumerable instances of solidarity in their fights.⁴⁶

Barker's repudiation of 'brotherhood' suggests that his solidarity was pragmatic in nature. Frank Cain presents Barker as an idealist who disapproved of the Darwin AWU because of their 'racist' attitudes towards Asian workers.⁴⁷ Barker, however, cannot be described as anti-racist. He divided East from West, envisaging white unionists as leaders of 'yellow' workers. Such paternalism only confirmed racial stereotypes and suggests that the idealised images of IWW solidarity have been exaggerated.

⁴⁴*Northern Territory Times*, 3 June, 2 September 1915. See retrospective account by 'One who knows', *Northern Territory Times*, 8 July 1920.

⁴⁵*Northern Territory Times*, 11 November 1915.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*

⁴⁷Frank Cain, *The Wobblies at War: A History of the IWW and the Great War in Australia*, Spectrum Publications, Melbourne, 1993, pp. 163-5.

Even without the support of the central IWW, there remained an internationalist element in Darwin unionism. The early members of the AWU, signed on in 1914, included both Greeks and Russians. Following the success of the Russian Revolution, Bolshevism gained in popularity in Darwin. One self-proclaimed Bolshevik, Thomas Macdonald, argued that Bolshevism was international and that it transcended nationalism. He wrote in the *Northern Territory Times* in 1919:

When the day comes that the different peoples of the earth come forward in a 'real League' the basis of which is their common humanity, I trust no national questions will arise and that the answer will be 'Aye, eve those also brother' even if he be not 'British'.⁴⁸

Of course, not all those who supported Bolshevism took this internationalist stance.

Darwin unionism after 1921

As a microcosm of Australian unionism, Darwin had unionists of all persuasions. Seen from the perspective of a small town, where 'coloured' workers were less anonymous, it is easier to find evidence of the more moderate, inclusive nationalism. This stance appeared to be a response to their experience of 'coloured' workers within the community. As will be seen in the last chapters of this thesis, it was difficult for unionists to remain purists on the matter of White Australia when its local application was clearly problematic. Nevertheless, for some their humanitarian stance was little more than rhetoric. Those who claimed the moral high-ground were critical of what they described as jingoistic nationalism. This moral stance was not particular to radical unionists, but was commonly found in the rhetoric of more conservative liberals. On the one hand, it should be read with a degree of scepticism, as mere political rhetoric. On the other hand, we must allow that some individuals genuinely questioned the moral basis for their actions and attempted to alter their actions accordingly. Both cases can be made for Darwin unionists.

This moderate nationalism was demonstrated in some of the early publications of the *Northern Standard*. First published in 1921, the *Standard*,

⁴⁸Letter to the editor, *Northern Territory Times*, 12 June 1919. This was in response to Alf Pain who criticised Bolshevism as 'unBritish'.

was owned by the Darwin AWU, soon to be reformed as the North Australian Industrial Union (NAIU). The decision to start a local paper was in keeping with the policy of the central AWU to encourage workers' newspapers throughout Australia.⁴⁹ Harold Nelson, Secretary of the Darwin Branch of the AWU in 1921, liked to present himself as a moderate nationalist. Nelson wrote in the *Standard* in April 1921:

That the Labor Party had been the chief offenders in this direction and till such times as we are represented by fearless legislators, men who will disdain to toady and pander to the 'Jingo class' then so long will 'State Socialism or Nationalisation' be a dismal failure.⁵⁰

The *Standard* declared its mission to support 'Labor, Democracy and national and human freedom'.⁵¹ The addition of the word 'human' suggests some basic degree of anti-racism in their perspective. Unlike later communist internationalism, however, the paper did not repudiate Christianity, publishing its beliefs under the headings 'The Devil's Dozen' and 'God's Own'. Included in the Devil's Dozen were imperialism, despotism and jingoism.⁵²

The overall tone of the early issues of the paper might be best described as being Labor left. On the issue of White Australia, however, the paper was full of discrepancies. The Darwin unionists were clearly following the southern debate over internationalism. In 1921 the *Northern Standard* reported that Willis, Secretary of the Miners' Union, had advocated that 'aliens should be educated to be good unionists' and that the question should be put to the ballot by the AWU.⁵³

The final decision of the AWU did not necessarily effect the NAIU as it was no longer affiliated to the AWU. During the AWU conference, when Nelson suggested forming the NAIU on the One Big Union principle, he had argued that they had 2000 members and wished to remain a part of the AWU.⁵⁴ The AWU executive, however, were somewhat doubtful about Nelson's anarchist tendencies and Darwin's physical isolation from the rest of the union movement. The Darwin Branch was regarded as a loose cannon, likely to turn in any direction.

⁴⁹AATU Conference, June 1921, p. 25.

⁵⁰*Northern Standard*, 12 April 1921.

⁵¹*Northern Standard*, 19 February 1921.

⁵²*Northern Standard*, 10 May 1921.

⁵³*Northern Standard*, 21 May 1921.

⁵⁴Official Report of the 35th Annual Convention, 1921, p. 16 and 19, AWU Deposit, E154/17, NBAC, ANU.

The Darwin locals, since the rebellion of 1919, were apt to use 'anarchic' methods to obtain their democratic rights. In 1921, a mob farewelled Minister Alex Poynton with demands for parliamentary representation for the Northern Territory. A crowd of 500 protesters gathered at the wharf with a poster draped with red ribbon reading: 'Liberate those men, whose only crime is defending your birthright. Chains and slavery never made a nation.' The crowd then sang the Red Flag while the Administrator and the Minister struck up God Save the King. In a show of solidarity, the sailors on board the gunboat *Geranium* joined in the Red Flag.⁵⁵ The protest was a success, and Harold Nelson was elected as the first federal Member for Parliament in December 1922. Significantly, Nelson did not stand as a Labor candidate, but rather as an independent with union support.⁵⁶ Nelson may have rejected Labor but it did not necessarily follow that he rejected their White Australian ethos.

The Rainbow Union

Rather than discuss White Australian racism in terms of stereotypical left and right politics, it is important to recognize individual differences with the union movement. The shift from early ambiguous attitudes to a more genuinely anti-racist stance occurred sporadically throughout the union movement with individual unionists gradually coming to understand the logic of anti-racism. In any given branch, at any given time, there were always individuals who were more or less 'enlightened', depending on their individual experiences and background. It is simplistic to imagine racism and anti-racism in stark opposition to each other; the relationship is more fluid. Searching for signs of internationalism is made all the more difficult by the separation of leftist policy of industrial unionism from internationalism. We cannot assume that those who supported left-wing policy were also anti-White Australia. One did not necessarily entail the other. Verity Burgmann wrote:

Even the 'left' of the labour movement was simply those militants with highly developed trade union consciousness who fought the economic battles most ferociously but were aggressively

⁵⁵David Carment and Murray Maynard, 'Nelson, Harold George (1881-1947)' in D. Carment, R. Maynard and A. Powell (eds.), *Northern Territory Dictionary of Biography, Volume One: To 1945*, NTU Press, Darwin, 1990, p.220; 'Exit Minister Poynton - Unprecedented Scene on Darwin Wharf', *Northern Standard*, 7 June 1921.

⁵⁶Carment and Maynard, 'Nelson, Harold George', p. 220.

nationalistic into the bargain. It is the tragedy of Australian labour that its left wing was the most nationalist section of the labour movement, and did not perform the counter hegemonic role that left wings normally do.⁵⁷

By the same token, the less radical Laborites were not necessarily more racist than left-leaning unionists. The relationship between Labor and communist, nationalist and internationalist might have been convenient for political rhetoric, but individual unionists were not so easily packaged.

This blurring of left and right was demonstrated in 1922, with the formation of a break-away union in Darwin calling itself the Northern Territory Workers' Union (NTWU). The NTWU members had initially attempted to resurrect the branch of the AWU, but they had been rejected by the central AWU executive.⁵⁸ The NTWU argued that Nelson was too authoritarian and his policies too radical. They had witnessed the Darwin Rebellion of 1919 and the closing of Vestey's Meat works and had decided that the 'direct action' approach was threatening the livelihood of Darwin's workers. Instead, they advocated 'a fair day's work for a fair day's pay'. Their stance made them popular with the conservative administration.⁵⁹ The new administrator, F. C. Urquhart had been sent to Darwin in 1921 to, 'curb the "socialist extremists"'. He had not long since been the Police Commissioner in Brisbane, in charge of putting down the Red Flag Riots.⁶⁰ He approved of the formation of the NTWU by workers whom he described as 'boycotted and persecuted men cast out and deprived of their livelihood by the tyrants of the North Australian Industrial Union'.⁶¹

The popularity of the NTWU with the administration was based on their willingness to act as strikebreakers on the wharf and their repudiation of 'go slow' tactics. When the NAIU went on strike, the NTWU stepped in as strikebreakers, leading the NAIU to characterise them as 'scabs'. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that these same 'scabs' remained as prominent Darwin unionists well into the 1930s. In 1927, when the two unions finally amalgamated, the new North Australia Workers' Union (NAWU) retained the old NTWU members in its executive. The president

⁵⁷Verity Burgmann, 'Capital and Labour' in Ann Curthoys and Andrew Markus (eds.), *Who Are Our Enemies?*, pp. 33-34.

⁵⁸H. Fisher approached the AWU. AWU Official Report of the 36th Annual Convention, NSW, January 1922, pp. 83-4, NBAC, ANU; *Northern Standard*, 27 June 1922.

⁵⁹The government reports referred to them as the new 'loyalist' union. A106, G1923/1403, AA ACT.

⁶⁰Evans, *The Red Flag Riots*, p. 46.

⁶¹Alan Powell, *Far Country, A Short History of the Northern Territory*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, 1982, p. 186.

of the NAWU in the 1930s, Bob Murray, was one of the NTWU 'strikebreakers' in 1922.

Despite their supposedly conservative credentials, the NTWU were not 'rabid' White Australians. In this instance, radicalism and White Australian sentiment were still aligned, while liberal conservatism had formed a strange alliance with IWW internationalism. The NAIU, writing in their newspaper, the *Northern Standard*, criticised the NTWU as the 'black labor crowd' and referred to them as 'Wobblers'. Nelson, speaking at a public meeting in 1922 accused the NTWU Secretary, Andy Rindberg, of advocating the same tactics as the 'Wobblers' and claimed that another NTWU organiser, Alf Pain, also advocated 'black labor', citing his earlier IWW connection.

Nelson queried the NTWU's initial attempt to rejoin the AWU, arguing that the NTWU acceptance of 'coloured' labour was incompatible with the constitution of the AWU. He described the AWU as 'one of the greatest exponents of the White Australian policy'.⁶² Such a statement was scarcely appropriate in 1922, given the debate over the AWU 'colour bar'. According to Andrew Markus, at this time the AWU had revised their membership rules to include all workers who 'understand and accept the policy of the Union', provided that their entry would not prejudice the union's interests. This rule was repealed after only one year, but this short-lived policy was most likely what had inspired the NTWU members to rejoin the AWU.⁶³

Another critic of the NTWU suggested calling them the 'Rainbow Union', referring both to their headquarters in Rainbow Cottage and their 'multi-coloured' membership.⁶⁴ The issue of 'race' was central to the conflict between the two unions. In their desire to emphasize the illegitimacy of the strike-breakers, the NAIU criticized the NTWU members, writing:

The ten Greeks are not to be taken seriously, as not understanding the situation and unable to speak or understand English, these men have been fooled ... The five half-castes are in an even worse position — coercion and bluff can make a half-caste do anything.⁶⁵

⁶²'Public Meeting', *Northern Standard*, 25 April 1922.

⁶³Andrew Markus, 'Talka Longa Mouth: Aborigines and the Labour Movement, 1890-1970', in Ann Curthoys and Andrew Markus (eds.) *Who Are Our Enemies?*, p. 141.

⁶⁴*Northern Standard*, 18 August 1922

⁶⁵'The Wharf Strike', *Northern Standard*, 11 August 1922.

It is doubtful that the Greeks, who had been working on the wharf since the AWU had first set up a Darwin Branch in 1914, were unable to understand the situation. If anything, in previous years, the Greeks had been accused of being too radical in their unionism.⁶⁶ Adding insult to injury, the NAIU claimed that in estimating the membership of the NTWU, they should not include the Greeks and 'half-castes', leaving a membership of only 23 whites in the union.

The NAIU did not regard Greeks and 'half-castes' as 'real' unionists, because neither satisfied their criteria for 'whiteness'. Kay Saunders notes a similar attitude towards Italian workers in the Queensland AWA.⁶⁷ As for the 'half-caste' workers, the NAIU described them in stereotypical terms as 'cheap coloured' labour, arguing that the railway authorities were organising 'all the half-castes available' in an endeavour to break the NAIU.⁶⁸ Another newspaper article reported that the railway Superintendent, had secured the services of 'all available half-castes from the Aboriginal Compound to assist in breaking the movement.' They asked: 'Is this the first step towards colored labor for the Territory?'⁶⁹

As founder and president of the NAIU, Harold Nelson, was apt to engage in a rather dramatic usage of White Australian rhetoric. He argued that the industrial turmoil in Darwin was hiding the real desire of the capitalist element – to usher in 'that dread curse – colored labor'. He wrote: 'Lurking on the horizon of this dastardly scheme ... must be discerned the hideous faces of the teeming hordes of the East.' He asked his members to not 'assist these traitors' and to 'conserve for Australia and its workers the indisputable inheritance of a White Australia.'⁷⁰ In a regular column of the *Standard*, a union commentator accused Prime Minister Billy Hughes of not securing a White Australia, quipping:

The uncrowned King of Australia says he knows nothing of colored labor being used by Government Departments in the N.T. ... we never heard of a White Australian using colored specs, to scan election problems.⁷¹

Nelson was remarkably flexible in his opinions, however, and his message shifted as soon as he was elected to parliament. Speaking in the

⁶⁶Membership of the AWU, Darwin District, 1914-15, AWU Papers, E154/52, NBAC, ANU.

⁶⁷Kay Saunders, 'Masters and Servants', in *Who Are Our Enemies?*, p. 105.

⁶⁸'Trouble on Waterside', *Northern Standard*, 8 August 1922.

⁶⁹*Northern Standard*, 15 August 1922.

⁷⁰'Reason', *Northern Standard*, 11 August 1922.

⁷¹'Notes, News and Comments', *Northern Standard*, 18 August 1922.

House of Representatives in 1923 he recreated himself as a humanitarian, stating:

Another desirable reform is the introduction of definite regulations governing the employment of natives. I assure honorable members that Mrs. Harriet Beecher-Stowe, who, in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, exposed the horrors of negro slavery in America, would shudder if she could know the conditions imposed upon the natives in the Northern Territory.⁷²

Nelson went on to describe the conditions, citing examples of chaining and flogging of Aboriginal workers. He despaired of improvement, commenting that: 'Any official in the Northern Territory who has the courage of his convictions, and dares to condemn the prevailing order of things soon finds that he has lost his position'.⁷³

Nelson's emphasis on the exploitation of Aboriginal workers was, of course, quite in keeping with White Australian ideology and indeed Nelson never openly repudiated White Australia. He nevertheless claimed to be against discrimination on the grounds of 'race', but this conviction was not necessarily in the form which we would recognise as anti-racism. As Stuart Macintyre points out, even among confirmed communists, there were conflicting opinions on 'coloured' labour in the mid-1920s. Macintyre cites examples of communists in the field continuing to regard Southern European workers as a potential menace to unionism and representing Aboriginal workers as 'backward' slaves.⁷⁴

By 1924, when Nelson, as the Northern Territory Member for Parliament, was on the campaign trail, his views on White Australia had softened considerably. In his desire to win the good will and votes of Australian-born Chinese, he claimed to support their causes. His change of opinion was noted in the opposition newspaper, the *Northern Territory Times* and Nelson was likened to George Reid, who during the Federation elections had been nicknamed 'Yes-No', for opposing and then supporting a White Australia.⁷⁵ According to Andrew Markus, writing in *Who Are Our Enemies?*, the Aboriginal workers of Darwin were sceptical about Nelson's support. Referring to Aboriginal approval of Darwin communists in later years, Markus cites the phrase: 'Nelson and Toupein, them fella humbug,

⁷²Nelson in House of Representatives speech, *CPP*. Volume 104, 1923-24, pp. 2465-6.

⁷³*Ibid.*, p. 2466.

⁷⁴Macintyre, *The Reds*, p. 126.

⁷⁵'Dud Member' writing in the *Northern Territory Times*, 30 September 1924.

talka longa mouth. You fella talka longa heart'.⁷⁶ It is likely, however, that this opinion of Harold Nelson and Robert Toupein, Secretary of the NAIU, had already been formed in the early 1920s.

Darwin communists

In 1926 it was decided to amalgamate the NAIU and the NTWU. At this time, the two unions had apparently decided that 'cheap' Aboriginal labour was their biggest problem. The NAIU asked for 'an end to the practice of employing abos [sic] on Government contracts', given that there were 150 unemployed in and around Darwin. They wrote: 'It is to be hoped that councillors will see the necessity of giving the white preference over the black.'⁷⁷ The following week the NTWU announced that it too 'resented the employment of blacks while there were whites available.'⁷⁸ Whatever their apparent differences, now both unions were adamant that 'black' workers were to be excluded. Thus, when the NAWU was formed in 1927, their constitution specifically excluded Aboriginal workers unless they were deemed to be 'half-caste'.

The NAWU executive approached the AWU, asking to affiliate, but they were again refused. By 1929 relations between the NAWU and AWU had become openly hostile.⁷⁹ Nevertheless, the NAWU retained the AWU's racially discriminatory membership rules which excluded Chinese, Japanese, Kanaka, Afghan, and 'any colored race'. The term 'colored race' was significant in that it replaced the previous 'coloured aliens' and thus allowed Aboriginal workers to be excluded. The membership rules of the NAWU, like those of the AWU, allowed only Australian-born children of 'Mixed Parentage (European on one side)'.⁸⁰ Furthermore, under the rules of the Aboriginal Department, union membership was limited to male 'half-castes' over the age of twenty-one. Female 'half-castes', who remained under the control of the Aboriginal Department, were not permitted to join the union.⁸¹

Writing in 1928, NAWU organiser, Owen Rowe, spoke on the proposal to boycott Aboriginal labour, stating that

⁷⁶Markus, 'Talka Longa Mouth', p. 150.

⁷⁷'Local Labor Questions', *Northern Standard*, 29 January 1926.

⁷⁸'Local Labor Questions', *Northern Standard*, 5 February 1926.

⁷⁹AWU Annual Convention 1928, p. 55, NBAC, ANU.

⁸⁰NAWU, 'Constitution and General Rules', Rule 6, Mitchell Library, NSW; Andrew Markus, 'Talka Longa Mouth', p. 149.

⁸¹The NAWU position on female 'half-castes' is considered in more detail in chapter six.

so far the union had not made the fight a racial question. They were not objecting to the abo. on the grounds of color, but on economic grounds, as the black slave was competing with the unskilled white workers.⁸²

This denial of racism was typical of White Australian rhetoric in this period. In previous years vehement White Australians had attacked 'Asiatic' workers, but by the late 1920s it was Aboriginal workers who were perceived as a threat. This campaign against Aboriginal workers was a step backwards, revoking the earlier AWU assurances that indigenous Australians would be encouraged to join the union.⁸³ The only voice of protest at the 1928 NAWU meeting was A. Woolon, previously secretary of the NTWU, who spoke on behalf of the Aboriginal workers, complaining that nobody 'had said one word about improving the abos. conditions'.⁸⁴

It was in this climate of renewed 'racial' discrimination that communist internationalism intervened. According to Frank Farrell, in '1928 the world communist movement veered leftwards in its policies and entered its so called "third period"'.⁸⁵ According to Andrew Markus, the Communist Party played a crucial role in changing union attitudes towards 'coloured' workers. He described the communists as 'the one section of the labour movement with an internationalist outlook and with an overt stance opposed to racism'.⁸⁶ The Communist International, of which the Australian Party was an affiliate, 'stipulated that it was the duty of communists to "inculcate a fraternal attitude to all workers, to demonstrate that the international proletariat knows no race prejudice"'.⁸⁷ Markus argued that the period 1928-1931 saw the radical transformation of attitudes and priorities in regard to Aboriginal workers in particular.⁸⁸ The communists were highly critical of the White Australia policy and the AWU as can be seen in this 1930 statement:

A vigorous attack upon the chauvinistic White Australia Policy of the Australian Social Fascist (ALP), the color bar of the AWU, and other Unions, must be waged to bring clearly to the minds of the

⁸²NAWU meeting, *Northern Standard*, 13 April 1928; Rowe continued as organiser until 1934, *Northern Standard*, 27 March 1934.

⁸³AWU Annual Meeting 1910. See chapter three.

⁸⁴Given the widespread use of the term 'abo.', although it is a derogatory term, it is not a useful indication of particular individual prejudice. NAWU meeting, *Northern Standard*, 20 April 1928.

⁸⁵Farrell, 'International Solidarity?', p. 134.

⁸⁶Andrew Markus, 'Talka Longa Mouth', p. 147.

⁸⁷Jane Degras cited in *Ibid.*, pp. 146-7.

⁸⁸*Ibid.*, p. 147.

workers, that the White Australia Policy breeds race hatreds that can only aid Imperialism in pitting the workers against each other ...and breaking down the standards of living...Not Race–Nation–Color
But CLASS against CLASS.⁸⁹

In keeping with this policy, the communist newspaper, *Workers' Weekly*, was quick to point out the failings of the NAWU. Rather than boycotting Aboriginal workers, it argued, the NAWU should be fighting for equal wages for all workers.

Evidently the NAWU members were in the habit of reading the CPA newspaper, the *Communist*. When one member plagiarised this journal in a *Northern Standard* article, he was immediately picked up by other unionists, including the NAWU president, John McCorry.⁹⁰ Perhaps inspired by the communist stance, in August 1928 it was decided at the NAWU annual meeting to take a plebiscite to amend rule 6, to provide: 'That any coloured person born in Australia who has passed a 3rd class school examination of State school standard be admitted to membership'.⁹¹ This plebiscite was supported by Harold Nelson, who had promised the Australian-born Chinese that he was in favour of their joining the union.⁹² The phrasing of this motion is interesting. In that it specified 'born in Australia', it was clearly not internationalist. The older IWW workers, such as Cubillo, would have been excluded under this clause. On the other hand the notion that education was a necessary prerequisite would have allowed the majority of young Chinese to join, but disallowed the majority of Aboriginal workers, unless they had been educated by missionaries. At this time there was still no formal program for Aboriginal education. In any case, the motion was rejected with 51 in favour and 109 against, but there was no indication as to whether those who rejected the proposal thought it too inclusive or not inclusive enough.⁹³

Another indication that the NAWU executive were leaning towards internationalism came in December when they organised a town meeting at the football oval to protest over the recently imposed 'colour bar' in the football league. The meeting was opened by Mahoney, who was to become notorious as a communist. Nelson was also present and stated:

⁸⁹*Workers' Weekly*, 7 March 1930, cited in *Ibid.*, p. 148.

⁹⁰*Northern Standard*, 14 and 17 August 1928.

⁹¹'N.A.W.U.', *Northern Standard*, 28 August 1928.

⁹²'Australian Chinese Reception for Mr. Nelson', *Northern Standard*, 25 September 1928.

⁹³*Workers' Weekly*, 13 April 1928; Markus, 'Talka Longa Mouth', p. 149.

I do not know why the colour line should be drawn ... I know of nowhere else other than the N.T. where such a bar existed. It appeared as though certain persons desired to set up a similar state of affairs as existed in Singapore, where everything socially was based on colour and caste.⁹⁴

In order to discourage such segregation, Bob Murray, later President of the NAWU, suggested that all the teams be mixed rather than having a separate 'coloured' team.

Given the previous overtly White Australian stance of NAWU secretary Robert Toupein, it is ironic that he should have sought to align himself with international communism. In 1929, he wrote an article entitled, 'Exploitation of Aborigines in Northern Australia' for the communist-backed *Pan-Pacific Worker*. This journal, like the Communist Party at the time, advocated the international union of workers regardless of 'race'.⁹⁵ The *Pan-Pacific Worker* clearly condemned White Australian chauvinism and the 'very dangerous racial prejudice based not only on the fear of economic competition from lower-paid labor ... but also the false doctrine of the superiority of the white ... race'.⁹⁶ At the time, of course, the ACTU, and the NAWU were affiliated with the Pan-Pacific Secretariat.⁹⁷ The Australian connection with this international body gave unionists access to similar communist movements in Vietnam, China, Japan and other Asian countries.⁹⁸ For both the ACTU and the NAWU, however, the relationship was short-lived, with the connection being severed in 1930.⁹⁹ This followed renewed AWU criticism, with Grayndler informing the 1930 AWU Annual Convention that the Secretariat's desire to remove racial barriers would be 'an open door for the coloured hordes of the North Pacific'.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁴This subject is discussed further in chapter seven. 'Readmittance of coloured players', *Northern Standard*, 11 December 1928.

⁹⁵R. Toupein, 'Exploitation of Aborigines in Northern Australia', in *Pan-Pacific Worker*, 1 September 1929; see also ' "White Australia" What it means: By Lily White', in *Pan-Pacific Worker*, 1 August 1928, pp. 6-9, AWU Deposit, P52/12, NBAC, ANU

⁹⁶PPTU Conference, Vladivostock, 'The Tasks of the Trade Unions in Australia', *Pan-Pacific Worker*, Volume II, no. 13, 2 December, 1929, p. 4. This paper questioned the ACTU affiliation with Labor and the Arbitration system, arguing that they must take up the slogan 'Not race war but class war'. p. 6.

⁹⁷The NAWU affiliated with the ACTU in 1929, after breaking with the AWU. Robert Toupein to C. Crofts, Australian Council of Trade Unions, Melbourne, 12 July 1929, ACTU papers, N21/48 NBAC, ANU.

⁹⁸Macintyre, *The Reds*, p. 112.

⁹⁹J. Hagan, *The History of the A.C.T.U.*, Longman Cheshire, Melbourne, 1981, p. 94; *Pan-Pacific Worker*, Volume III, no. 2, 1 February 1930, S. Carpenter, 'A Review of Conditions in Australia', pp. 45-50; *Pan-Pacific Worker*, 'The Break with the Secretariat', pp. 102-5; see also F. Farrell, 'International Solidarity', pp. 129-137;

¹⁰⁰Hearn and Knowles, *One Big Union*, pp. 142-143.

The year 1928 was apparently the only time during which Darwin unionists presented a united front. After 1929, a division began to appear between communist and Labor unionists. At the 1929 annual meeting, budding communist, Mahoney stood against Laborite, Rowe for the paid position of organiser but lost, 81 to 193 votes.¹⁰¹ The Labor faction within the NAWU accused Mahoney of wanting to smash the NAWU and replace it with 'a Communists' brigade'.¹⁰² Laborite, Bob Murray argued that Mahoney was advocating the removal of the 'colour bar only in order to gain control of the union and wrote that he had gone

crawling and cringing to the Chinese boys and poor unfortunate foreigners, whom he tried to make believe he was their emancipator and would get them into the Union in the hopes of them putting him in control...¹⁰³

Bob Murray, writing under the name of 'The Cod', used the term 'boys' to describe Chinese workers in the typical way of this period. His language, however, when he described Mahoney organising the 'half-caste' vote was even more extreme. He wrote that Mahoney had 'organised all the "boongs" who had a vote'. Murray apologised for the use of the term 'boongs' adding that they were his friends and in his view, Mahoney was 'only fit to clean their boots'.¹⁰⁴ This degree of offensive language was extremely rare in the *Northern Standard* and this is no doubt why Murray chose to write under a pseudonym. It is also a sharp reminder that the language which we have on record is already duly edited in the act of printing.

In May 1930, the *Workers' Weekly* explicitly criticised the NAWU stating that:

Certain of the leading elements in the North Aust. Workers' Union are themselves exploiters of native labor and it was because of the stand that members of the C.P. took against this, that has caused these two-faced individuals so much uneasiness... Coms Waldie and Mahoney, not being at that time members of the C.P., but being, nevertheless, true unionists and working-class fighters, protested against the union taking action against the Chinese merchants until

¹⁰¹*Northern Standard*, 30 August 1929.

¹⁰²*Northern Standard*, 1 October 1929. Murray was particularly upset that Mahoney had only recently arrived in Darwin while he had spent the past 25 years in the North. *Northern Standard*, 8 October 1929.

¹⁰³*Northern Standard*, 8 October 1929.

¹⁰⁴*Ibid.*

the president of the union and other leading members of the union ceased exploiting the aboriginals ... At a meeting of the union sometime later Com. Mahoney moved 'that all aboriginals and Chinese workers be admitted to the union'. He was booed and hooted by these reactionists and nothing further has been attempted by these 'unionists' to organise the white and black workers into a force to fight the capitalists in North Australia.¹⁰⁵

In a later issue of the *Workers' Weekly*, Toupein was accused of being a 'Labor fascist'.¹⁰⁶ At the 1930 annual meeting of the NAWU, Mahoney's support had dwindled even further. During the executive elections, of the 169 votes cast, Waldie, who went on to found the Darwin CPA, gained 15 votes, and Mahoney 13, giving them the support of approximately 17 per cent of the voting members.¹⁰⁷ They proposed that the membership rules be altered to read: 'That all bona-fide workers irrespective of color, shall be admitted to full membership in the NAWU'. Their proposal, which was genuinely internationalist, was rejected.

Mahoney continued to lobby for Aboriginal rights throughout the depression. In 1931, writing for the communist-backed Unemployed Workers' Movement, he declared:

That members of this Movement are of the opinion that slavery of the worst type is being perpetrated in the Northern Territory towards the aboriginal and half caste race, and we shall do all in our power to force the Government to do away with their present slave conditions ...we demand that they be granted full rights to enter any Trade Union ... We furthermore condemn the churches and missions and Trade Unions for not taking up the struggle on behalf of the aboriginal and half caste race to bring about their complete emancipation from the present system.¹⁰⁸

This followed the announcement in September 1931 of the CPA fourteen point program which demanded: equal rights for all Aborigines; full wages;

¹⁰⁵*Workers' Weekly*, 30 May, 1930, p. 2.

¹⁰⁶*Workers' Weekly*, 6 February 1931.

¹⁰⁷*Northern Standard*, 2 September 1930.

¹⁰⁸*Workers' Weekly*, 6 November 1931, p.4. See also Mahoney (?) in the *Workers' Weekly*, 10 January 1930, stating: 'The white workers of Darwin must realise that they will gain nothing by fighting the colored workers.'

the abolition of the Protection Boards; and the creation of independent Aboriginal republics in Central, Northern and North West Australia.¹⁰⁹

These plans went far beyond the emerging Assimilation programs and touched on issues which are debated even today. While the Communists were clearly progressive in their stance, they were still inclined to portray Aboriginal people as victims who were trapped by their 'backward' culture. A *Workers' Weekly* article stated that it was 'the duty of all organisations of the exploited white population to raise their voices in opposition to this vile treatment of a backward people'.¹¹⁰ Thus even the most progressive thinkers of the time were caught up in the ideology of paternalism. This view was confirmed by communist Frank Hardy who wrote:

How do you explain that white Australians Left, Right and centre believe that the Aborigines cannot help themselves, that white men must make their decisions, decide their fate? ¹¹¹

The communist Unemployed Workers' Movement, led by Mahoney, was wide-ranging in its interests.¹¹² In 1931 they protested regarding the deportation of Koepanger pearling crews who were on strike. They protested against the White Australia policy, demanding that 'the clause in the Immigration Act, that is the dictation test, whereby these men are victimised, shall be withdrawn.' They also protested on behalf of the Chinese community regarding immigration matters.¹¹³

Within Darwin's 'coloured' community, Mahoney gained a great deal of popular support. This was in contrast to later communists who were perceived as hostile to the local community. This is not unusual, as communist popular support was at its highest in the depression years. According to Val McGinniss, the 1929 communist demonstration included most of the 'coloured' community. He recalled that 'half-castes, Filipinos, Chinese, Japanese, whites, Italians, Greeks and everything was all mixed up in it'.¹¹⁴ Following the communist demonstrations in 1930, the federal government took steps to minimise the activities of Darwin unionists,

¹⁰⁹*Workers' Weekly*, 24 September 1931, p. 2.

¹¹⁰*Workers' Weekly*, 4 May. 1934, p. 6.

¹¹¹Frank Hardy, *The Unlucky Australians*, Nelson, Melbourne, 1968, p. 24.

¹¹²Mahoney was leader of the Unemployed Workers' Movement in Darwin and was arrested during their 1931 protests. See A1/15 31/4202, *N.T. Times*, 30 January 1931, 21 March 1931; 24 April 1931 AA ACT; Lockwood, *The Front Door, Darwin, 1869-1969*, Angus & Robertson, London, 1969, pp. 242-7.

¹¹³Letter of protest by F. Martin, Secretary of the U.W.M., *Northern Standard*, 25 August 1931.

¹¹⁴Val McGinniss, Transcript of interview by Janet Dickinson, Tape 4, p. 1, TS 532, NTRS 226, 1984, NTAS.

including arresting communists who addressed the public on the streets of Darwin.¹¹⁵ By 1933 the police had compiled a list of permanent communists in Darwin which included eighteen names.¹¹⁶ Despite government attempts to suppress communism in Darwin, by the mid-1930s, an official branch of the CPA had been formed. This should have signalled a renewal in efforts to minimize racism in Darwin, but I have the impression that the communists after 1935 were more concerned with gaining control of the union and less concerned with helping the 'coloured' community.

Communist take-over, 1935-1940

The final phase in the struggle of the internationalists was played out in the late 1930s. Ironically, by the time the communists were successful in 1940, they were no longer as popular with the local 'coloured' workers, many of whom had by then joined the NAWU. The tension between Labor and communist unionists escalated in 1936 as the *Standard* reported that:

An effort will be made by the 'militants' to capture the Executive positions in the N.A.W.U. and a full ticket will be run, with the backing of the Communist Party. ... It looks as if the elections will be a straight out fight between Sane Unionism and Direct Action.¹¹⁷

In an appeal to members, Bob Murray, president of the NAWU, reminded them how Toupein, had been driven out by the communists and that next they would drive him out too and 'smash the union as they smashed the Seaman's Union'.¹¹⁸ The communists already held prominent positions in the union with John Basil Waldie, being both head of the sorting shed as well as Secretary of the Darwin branch of the Communist Party.¹¹⁹ In the 1936 Annual NAWU elections, Waldie ran against laborite McKinnon for president. McKinnon won 240 votes to 66.¹²⁰ With only 22 per cent of the votes the communists were still far from taking control of the union. In

¹¹⁵S. Knowles, for Secretary, Department of Home Affairs, 16 February 1932, A467/1 SF42/7, AA ACT.

¹¹⁶The executive officers were Waldie, J. B., Dalton and S. Dodson. Others were Jameson, E., Hayward, B. V., Gordon, J., Webb, F., Zumfeldt, T. N., Calma, F., Mooney, J., Bryan, J. W., Ryan, J. J., Legget, N., McDonah, J., Jones, T. W., Green, M., Cardona, J., Jennings, W. Report by A. V. Stretton, Superintendent of Police to Officer-in-charge of Oil Tanks Construction, 27 April 1933, A467/1 SF 42/61, AA ACT.

¹¹⁷*Northern Standard*, 21 April 1936.

¹¹⁸*Northern Standard*, 12 May 1936.

¹¹⁹'Some Surprises', *Northern Standard*, 19 May 1936.

¹²⁰Note there were approximately 900 members in the NAWU in 1936. *Northern Standard*, 26 May 1936.

June 1936 the Labor faction of the NAWU voted to amend the union rules giving them the power to eject members should they create disturbances. This revision was specifically aimed at the communist members.¹²¹

To what extent the communists claimed the 'coloured' workers as their supporters it is difficult to ascertain, but there is evidence that not all 'half-caste' members supported them, despite the fact that the communists championed their cause.¹²² When communist Charlie Priest published an attack on the president of the NAWU, Bob Murray, in 1936, it was Lawrence Cubillo, of Filipino-Aboriginal descent, who gave evidence in court that Priest had been handing out pamphlets on the wharf.¹²³ As will be discussed in Chapter Seven, 'half-caste' workers were welcomed in the NAWU and had strong social links with the Labor faction. In fact, they had little to gain from supporting the communists.

Religion was clearly one subject on which the communists would have lost the support of many 'coloured' workers. As Stuart Macintyre has noted, the Labor supporters tended to be Catholic and they tended to recoil 'from the atheist materialism of the communist'.¹²⁴ Christianity in general and Catholicism in particular was favoured by the majority of 'half-castes', Filipinos, Chinese and Japanese. Many sent their children to the Convent School for their education. The Labor faction of the NAWU were mostly Catholic. Robert Toupein, who had been Secretary of the NAWU since its origins was a Catholic and present at the opening of the Catholic Club in 1919. Following his resignation in 1935, he was replaced by Jack McDonald, also a Catholic and passionately anti-communist. One has only to look through the wedding notices to see how many of the NAWU members were Catholics.¹²⁵

Nevertheless, by 1939 the NAWU was in constant turmoil, with some members following the communists and others McDonald. At the 1939 annual meeting of the NAWU it was suggested that some members had no confidence in the secretary McDonald.¹²⁶ On December 12, 1939, Craig, a

¹²¹'N.A.W.U. Rules, Result of Ballot', *Northern Standard*, 23 June 1936.

¹²²Douglas Lockwood, *The Front Door*, p. 243; see also Litchfield papers, NAL regarding Communists organising dances at which 'half-castes' were given alcohol in defiance of the Aboriginals Ordinance.

¹²³*Northern Standard*, 12 June 1936.

¹²⁴Macintyre, *The Reds*, pp. 92-3.

¹²⁵Thomas O'Connor (Con) Scott, Transcript of interview by Margaret Kowald, 1990, p. 17, Tape 1, TS616, NTRS 226, NTAS; Val McGinness Interview, p. 27; *Northern Standard*, 11 September 1936, 'Writ of Habeas Corpus'; 2 June 1936, 'Round About'; For NSW comparison, see Michael Hogan, 'Municipal Labor in New South Wales', *Labour History*, no. 72, May 1997, p. 142; *Northern Standard*, 11 September 1936; Inez Cubillo Carter, 'Cubillo, Delphin Antonio', in D. Carment and B. James (eds.), *Northern Territory Dictionary of Biography, Volume Two*, NTU Press, Darwin, 1992, pp. 43-4.; 'Cardinal's Lenten Pastoral', *Northern Standard*, 10 March 1936.

¹²⁶*Northern Standard*, 18 April 1939.

recently arrived communist agitator, put the motion that the NAWU had no confidence in the officials and that they wanted new officers. The issue of 'coloured' workers is not mentioned at all during this meeting.¹²⁷ The *Standard* reported in January 1940 that 'certain individuals, who have recently arrived in Darwin, intended 'taking charge' of Union affairs' and to prevent this occurring the secretary, McDonald removed the union books and documents to a safe place.¹²⁸ The newcomers declared in February 1940 that 'A change in the administration of the N.A.W.U. has taken place.'¹²⁹ The editor of the *Standard*, Donald McKinnon resigned immediately, after almost 20 years with the paper.¹³⁰ The new Secretary L. T. Craig, wrote to C. Crofts of the ACTU to announce the take-over, telling him that the union had been so badly organised that they had left no formal paperwork or membership lists. He did not mention that McDonald had refused to hand them over to him.¹³¹

Once under communist management, their internationalist stance was confirmed by Craig in a statement, in which he wrote:

The question of foreigners on any work in Australia affects unionists only in that foreigners must be members of the union and be prepared to recognise and uphold union principles and conditions of labour. Unions can in no way support a claim that a man shall not be employed on a job because of nationality of colour. Such elementary Fascist principle must not be permitted to creep into unionism.¹³²

The use of the term 'foreigners' was quite new in 'racial' discourse. The emphasis was no longer on 'coloured' labour so much as on 'foreign' labour.

In response to Craig's take-over of the NAWU, McDonald organised a petition to be signed by all members of the NAWU who had confidence in the original executive officers. The lengthy list included most of the local Darwin workers and included Greeks, 'half-castes', Russians, Italians, Filipinos, and Chinese. The inclusion of several Australian-born Chinese is

¹²⁷'N.A.W.U. Meeting', *Northern Standard*, 12 December 1939.

¹²⁸'The Wreckers?', *Northern Standard*, 9 January 1940.

¹²⁹*Northern Standard*, 27 February 1940; McDonald said their election was not according to the constitution, *Northern Standard*, 12 March 1940.

¹³⁰'The Editor's Swan Song', *Northern Standard*, 3 March 1940.

¹³¹New executive of NAWU, 1940: President B. Markham, Vice-President B. Froggart, Treasurer J. Hynes, Secretary L. T. Craig, L. T. Craig to Crofts, ACTU, 28 February 1940, ACTU Papers, N21/48, NBAC, ANU.

¹³²Editorial Note, *Northern Standard*, 8 March 1940.

the only hint that the NAWU had already altered its membership rules to include Australian-born Chinese. This change most likely took place between 1935 and 1937.¹³³ Christine Inglis, who similarly perused the *Northern Standard*, also was unable to discover the precise date.¹³⁴

Finding confirmation of the removal of the NAWU 'colour bar' is difficult as this was a period of confusion in the union itself. Most significant of all, however, was the May 1935 Annual Meeting. Secretary Robert Toupein announced that they would consider the deletion of the portion of Rule 6 which excluded 'coloured' races from membership. The proceedings of the meeting were disrupted, however, with Toupein being accused by the communists of miscalculating the balance sheets, a charge which caused him to tender his resignation. Amidst this confusion the question of amending the 'colour bar' was not reported.¹³⁵

Thus, there is some doubt as to the actual role of the communists in the removing the NAWU 'colour bar'. Their lack of popularity with the 'coloured' workers continued throughout 1940. The majority of unionists refused to acknowledge the new Executive and boycotted the 1940 annual meeting.¹³⁶ The situation was resolved only when Craig was replaced in June 1940 by Jack McPhillips. McPhillips was a man who had excellent credentials with both the AWU and the ALP, and communist unionists such as J. Healy, the General Secretary of the Waterside Workers Federation.¹³⁷ At the same time, Joseph 'Yorky' Walker, another communist, was put in charge of the waterside section.¹³⁸ It was only after the war, that internationalist unionism was confirmed with the discriminatory membership clause being officially removed from the NAWU Constitution in 1948.¹³⁹

It cannot be assumed that all the credit for 'progressive' policies is owed to the communist members of the NAWU. Julie Wells describes the period of militancy from 1945-1952, arguing that under communist leadership 'the struggle for better living conditions and equal wages for Aborigines and citizenship rights, gathered momentum.'¹⁴⁰ But Wells also argued that the aspirations of the CPA and the 'coloured' community were not necessarily the same. She notes that Jack McGinness, President of the

¹³³'Carry on Executive', *Northern Standard*, 9 January 1940.

¹³⁴Christine Inglis, 'The Darwin Chinese: a study of assimilation', MA thesis, ANU, 1967, p. 33.

¹³⁵*Northern Standard*, 31 May 1935.

¹³⁶'Waterside Workers Defy Executive Council', *Northern Standard*, 3 May 1940.

¹³⁷'New Union Secretary', *Northern Standard*, 21 June 1940.

¹³⁸Douglas Lockwood, *Australia's Pearl Harbour, Darwin 1942*, Penguin Books, Melbourne, 1992, p. 69.

¹³⁹Markus, 'Talka Longa Mouth', p. 152.

¹⁴⁰Julie Wells, *The Long March: Assimilation Policy and Practice in Darwin, The Northern Territory, 1939-1967*, Ph.D. Thesis, University of Queensland, 1995, p. 71.

Halfcaste Progress Association, (re-formed in 1951), was not a member of the CPA, and that he went on to become the first Aboriginal president of the NAWU. In fact she did not find evidence of *any* 'coloured' members of the CPA in Darwin during the period up to 1952.¹⁴¹ Ultimately, it appeared that CPA internationalism was not sufficient to promote an enduring sense of common cause with Darwin's 'coloured' community. In speaking with Victor Villaflor, a Darwin man of Aboriginal descent, I was puzzled that he recalled the popularity of Mahoney in the 1930s, but was quite adamant that Mahoney was not a communist. The communists came later, he explained, and his tone suggested that this was a term which carried bad connotations.¹⁴² Andrew Markus argued the case in favour of communist unionists in his 1978 article 'Talka Longa Mouth', but this chapter has pointed to a far more complex interplay of party politics and issues of 'race'.

Conclusion

During the period in question, the presence of I.W.W. and later communist unionists in Darwin forced the union to reconsider the exclusion of 'coloured' workers. The internationalists imagined an Australia in which both 'white' and 'coloured' residents could be granted equal rights. The ideology of internationalism denied the relevance of 'race' as a social organising factor. The Labor unionists, however, as the original exponents of White Australia remained fundamentally nationalist in their perspective. Nevertheless, they too gradually shifted from blatant exclusionism to an acceptance of some 'coloured' labour. Their position was based on new boundaries of inclusion-exclusion, where 'colour' or 'race' could be overlooked provided the individuals satisfied their criteria of being 'Australian', either by birth or by cultural assimilation.

What is interesting about these two models is that the latter, though imperfect, found favour with many 'coloured' workers, who themselves were eager to be accepted as Australians. The proposed qualities of this new version of Australian nationalism appealed to many who were persuaded by the rhetoric of Australia's virtues and sought the security of belonging. There is a tendency for present-day multicultural exponents to take the early internationalists as their forerunners. They were most clearly the voice of opposition to White Australia. On the other hand, given that


¹⁴¹*Ibid.*, p. 72.

¹⁴²Interview with Victor Villaflor, Darwin, 16 December 1996. Victor Villaflor, of Aboriginal-Filipino descent was born in Darwin in 1917.

multiculturalism still encourages a sense of Australian nationalism, there is some resonance with the views of the moderate nationalists, who promoted a more flexible notion of citizenship. The extent to which this position was accepted throughout Australia would be an interesting inquiry. With the 1930s being a decade of predominantly conservative government, however, the labour movement can no longer be used as a guide to popular opinion. For this reason, the next chapter turns to consider the views of the conservatives on White Australia and 'coloured' labour.

Harbour foreshore, Stokes Hill Wharf, M.V. 'Merkur'.
(PH0082/0074, D. Purdon Collection, Northern Territory Library)

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Chapter five

A colonial view

This chapter considers opposition to the White Australia policy by those who favoured the continuation of a policy of 'mixed' colonialism and a continued reliance on 'coloured' labour. These people tended to be conservative in politics and concerned more with the interests of capital rather than labour. From this colonial perspective, the Northern Territory was yet another tropical possession to be exploited and 'developed'. They had little sympathy with Labor's plans to draw the Territory into the White Australian nation.

Proponents of this policy were to be found in the highest levels of British and Australian government, and were supported by the elite business and administrative class in Darwin. An examination of the 1901 Senate debate indicates that these 'colonialists', as I will call them, were quite outspoken in their opposition to White Australia. They justified their position in both economic and cultural terms. From an economic perspective, the use of 'cheap coloured' labour was regarded as necessary for the success of tropical agriculture. In cultural terms, they claimed to support British liberalism which advocated a broad-minded cosmopolitan attitude towards other peoples. Unlike the proponents of White Australia, those with 'colonial' leanings were content to live in a 'multi-racial' society, assuming of course that their own positions of power remained inviolate.

Bipartisan White Australia?

It has been argued that the primary motive for Federation was to ensure a national policy on immigration, thus enabling parliament to protect the nation's borders from 'coloured' immigrants. The suggestion that White Australia was a unifying force and a bipartisan national policy is only true if we examine political rhetoric at its most superficial level. Any examination of this apparent agreement reveals clear opposition from both left and right. As has been discussed in previous chapters, White Australia, especially in its labour policy was clearly the program of the Labor Party. Similarly, the

opposing push to employ indentured 'coloured' labour can be attributed to the conservative party, the Free-trader Party whose supporters were later incorporated into the Liberal, National and Country Parties.

According to contemporary critic, Gizen-No-Teki, when the *Immigration Restriction Act* was debated in the House of Representatives, it was greeted with enthusiasm and overt displays of jingoistic nationalism from all sides. The only parliamentarian who spoke against the policy was Bruce Smith who, according to Gizen-No-Teki had

saved the reputation of Australia in the eyes of the thinking men of all nations ... And there are thousands of men and women in Australia who regard him with feelings of the deepest gratitude and admiration for having voiced their sentiments of indignant protest against an Act which, had this speech not been delivered, would have gone forth as the *unanimous* expression of the will of the Australian people.¹

From the detailed information in his book, *Colorphobia*, it can be assumed that he was present in the House during these debates. He appears not to have realised, however, that the same bill received quite a different reception in the Senate.

The 1901 Senate debate

The Free-traders who dominated the Senate in 1901 made it clear that they objected to the White Australia policy on many points. One of the recurring themes was that a special case needed to be made for the Australian tropics. Senator Macfarlane, for example, argued in favour of a Plural Australia:

I deny that at present there is any danger of the contamination of our race. An English man is not contaminated by a residence among the millions of India or China; ... The Japanese are a very intelligent race whom we can look up to and respect, and we can derive great profit from our intercourse with them. Of course we, of the British race, naturally feel that we must dominate this Commonwealth. But in the tropics, in the low, damp, richer soils, we cannot go against

¹Gizen-No-Teki, *Colorphobia, An Exposure of the 'White Australia' Fallacy*, R.T. Kelly, Sydney, 1903, p. 135.

Nature and do tropical labour there without a serious deterioration of our race.²

Macfarlane was citing contemporary 'scientific' wisdom when he spoke of the possible 'deterioration' of the 'white race' in the tropics. He argued the case thus, in order to avoid any suggestion that they favoured 'coloured' labour on the grounds that it was more profitable.

Victorian Senator Frederick Sargood was similarly adamant that the tropics required an exemption from the White Australia policy on the grounds that it would be detrimental to the health of white workers.

As regards the northern portions of Queensland, South Australia, and Western Australia, we have either to let in, under stringent provisions, coloured races for the cultivation and development of those territories, or to let them go to waste. ... we must either allow the whole of the northern territories above a certain latitude to return to a state of nature, or admit under restrictive legislation coloured races.³

Yet another senator who called for a modification to White Australia was Senator Dobson of Tasmania who stated:

Australia cannot be perfectly white. Is it not now almost white enough for any one? I find that in 1891 there were 51,900 aliens of all descriptions in Australia, and I understand that the statisticians say that during the last ten years the number of these people has not increased to more than 70,000 or 80,000. Considering the extent of ~~this~~ vast continent, with its tropical and semi-tropical regions, and that the Commonwealth has been asked to take over the Northern Territory practically, because it has been found impossible to develop it with white men — the climate being such that blackfellows only can work there — there is no occasion for hurrying on legislation of this kind.⁴

²CPD, 1901, Senate, p. 7185.

³*Ibid.*, p. 7251.

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 7254.

This emphasis on development highlighted the 'colonial' character of the Territory and thus allowed them to favour policies borrowed from the colonial period over nationalist ideals.

Free-trader Senator John Ferguson of Queensland called the White Australia policy a 'ridiculous' and 'political cry'. Supporting the government decision to temporarily allow the use of 'Kanakan' labour in Queensland, he argued that the sugar plantations in the north would not survive without 'coloured' labour.

We shall be able to develop the richest part of our territory with our own people, otherwise it would remain a waste and a wilderness for ever. No white men will ever develop the north except with the assistance of people of that class. I have been 40 years in the tropics — before some honorable senators were born — and I know what it means.⁵

Fully aware of the opposition to the exploitation of workers on plantations, he argued that under White Australia, the industry would collapse and they would be forced to import sugar from countries where it was grown under conditions which would not be tolerated in Australia. Ferguson's suggestion that an Australian version of 'plantation' colonialism would be more humane than that practised elsewhere assumed that Australia was in the forefront of progressive labour policy. The actual conditions of 'coloured' labour outlined in later chapters does not support such romanticism.

Senator Ferguson also spoke of the impossibility of attaining the goal of a White Australia. He pointed to the work done by the Aboriginal population in the tropics, estimating the population to be some 50,000 and stated,

they are not going to be exterminated in the same way as the tribes in the south. ... We cannot get rid of our own people, and we cannot get rid of the natives of New Guinea, because we are going to annex them, and they will form a part of our own population. Surely we shall not prevent them from earning a living in their own country?⁶

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 7283.

⁶*Ibid.*

The Labor response to this argument was, again, that the Aboriginal workers were being exploited as 'cheap' labour by the plantation owners. They did not consider this as 'earning a living'.

Senator Downer of South Australia, was careful to emphasise their intention to regulate labour conditions, thus avoiding any accusations of exploitation, but he too rejected the notion that the tropics should be reserved for a 'white' population, stating:

it may be necessary, in some of the tropical parts of Australia, to use, on decent, respectable terms, the labour which is suited to the occasion, rather than to say, selfishly, as some men do ... 'Better hold the territory' — this big portion of the world — 'unoccupied, unimproved, than allow the only people to come into it who can occupy and improve it'.⁷

This was a reference to Deakin's speech that it would be better to leave the north undeveloped than allow 'coloured' immigration.

The notion of 'decent' treatment was a recurring theme in the debates. South Australian Protectionist Senator, Thomas Playford argued that if 'coloured' immigrants were to be allowed in, they should be treated 'like men'.⁸ He stated that:

To prevent them getting work when they were in the country was the unfair part of the provision. ... They should be prevented from coming into the country, but once they are in the country, they should be allowed to earn their living honestly.⁹

This was an important qualification to the White Australia policy and one which remained at the very heart of the debate over the following decades. It pointed to the impossible desire of the Labor Party to remove all 'coloured' workers when they were already a permanent part of Australian society. In that the colonies had been 'mixed' a degree of absorption and assimilation already had taken place and these 'coloured' workers could not simply be extricated and deported.

⁷*Ibid.*, p. 7235.

⁸Thomas Playford was born in London in 1837 and before entering politics had preached for the Christian Society. John Playford, 'Thomas Playford (1837-1915)', in G. Serle (ed.), *Australian Dictionary of Biography, Volume 11: 1891-1939*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, 1988, p. 245.

⁹*Ibid.*, p. 7180.

Despite Free-Trader attempts to present their arguments in a humanitarian context, their advocacy of 'coloured' labour was consistently rejected by the Labor Party. Speaking on behalf of the AWU in 1905, Spence stressed that only the Labor Socialist government truly believed in White Australia, arguing that on the issue of coloured labour:

The anti-social crowd want to bring in more on the plea of developing the North. They will repeat the South African experience if you vote them in power. They prefer Lascars and Asiatics on our mail boats to white men. They like to own slaves, as the white worker is not submissive enough. They admit that the Lascar is not cheaper.¹⁰

The hostility between the two political groups is so striking that it is surprising that historians ever concluded that White Australia had bipartisan acceptance.

Of course, many of these conservative Senators did vote in favour of the *Immigration Restriction Act*, but their parliamentary speeches indicate that they did so reluctantly and without the White Australian fervour of the Labor Party. Liberal Free-trader Senator, Edward Pulsford, in his anti-White Australia speech, read a letter from an Indian community in Victoria. In this letter, representatives of the Indian community appealed to the government to recognise them as part of the 'British nation', writing:

We are, therefore, greatly pained that there is so much talk about a white Australia. Is it our fault that the Almighty God made us of dark-coloured skin ... If we are member of the British nation, then why should we be denied equal rights with any other members of same?¹¹

Pulsford commented that he could not bring himself to vote for the Immigration Restriction Bill which he described as 'insulting and brutal'.

Despite his protestations, he agreed that they had 'a duty' to restrict 'the immigration of Asiatics' because 'that is what the electorate demanded at the last election'. Nevertheless, with a display of British patriotism, he claimed that it was the 'proud boast' of Britain that 'all nations, however weak or oppressed, have friends in the British race'. He asked: 'Surely we are

¹⁰Mark Hearn and Harry Knowles, *One Big Union, A History of the Australian Workers Union 1886-1994*, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, 1996, p. 12.

¹¹CPD, 1901, Senate, pp. 7157-58.

not going to do anything to dim that lustre, which is part of our heritage?'¹² Senator Pulsford was quite passionate in his declaration against racial prejudice, stating:

I look upon the whole of the inhabitants of Asia as my friends. I am perfectly willing that they should be called my friends, and I hope so long as God gives me breath that I shall have the courage to stand up for what I consider to be right for them, as I shall stand up for what I consider to be right for myself and for any other person.¹³

In 1905, he was still lobbying against the White Australia policy on behalf of the Japanese.¹⁴

Senator Harney was another who somewhat reluctantly agreed to support White Australia though his position was more equivocal. He stated:

For a long time it did seem to me to be ungenerous, bigoted, narrow for us to arrogate to ourselves a superiority over all the Asiatic peoples, who knew a high state of civilization while our ancestors were in a state of barbarism ... But not withstanding that, when I come to consider how I should cast my vote and discharge the duty, which, as a representative, I owe to Australian feeling, I am satisfied that I ought strenuously to oppose any further admission of Asiatics or Africans to our shores. ... for some time I found myself in the opposite camp by reason of the grounds on which a white Australia was advocated. We were told that these people were ignorant, sordid, immoral, that to touch them would contaminate the noble Briton. I have no sympathy with those arguments. I am not prepared to admit, ... that the Asiatic peoples are inferior to us in any respect, morally, intellectually, or physically. But admitting their equality, even their superiority, I still say that we should keep them out. The question is after all, not one of degree, but one of kind. They are totally different from us, root, branch and fibre.¹⁵

¹²*Ibid.*, p. 7158.

¹³*Ibid.*, p. 7156.

¹⁴Edward Pulsford was born in Staffordshire in 1884, son of a Baptist minister. W. G. McMinn, 'Pulsford, Edward (1844-1919), in G Serle (ed.), *Australian Dictionary of Biography, Volume 11: 1891-1939*, pp. 307-308.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, p. 7171.

Senator Sir Frederick Sargood displayed a sense of class elitism which overrode any sense of 'racial' loyalty. He argued that he would 'infinitely rather have the Japanese come in here than some of the lower class Europeans'.¹⁶ He argued that there was no 'real danger, moral or otherwise' in the presence of 'aliens' in Australia, and that in fact the Chinese had been of 'considerable benefit' to the colonies. He argued that without the Chinese, the working classes would not have had access to cheap fruit and vegetables.¹⁷

Another advocate of the 'educated' Japanese, was Tasmanian Senator Henry Dobson who thought that 'it would be a very good thing for the workers of Australia if a few educated Japanese, or educated men of any race, came here'. He argued that by trying to 'build a wall around Australia to prevent the workmen from competing with any one but themselves' they would also be prevented from learning new skills.¹⁸

To my knowledge, in the various histories of White Australia there has been no indication that such a degree of opposition existed to the policy. The conservative opposition has been represented by historians in much the same critical terms as were used by their contemporary Labor opponents. The difficulty with this blanket rejection of their stance is that we ignore what was potentially an important source of early anti-racism. As will be discussed in the next chapters, the 'coloured' labour lobby were successful in retaining some forms of 'coloured' labour in northern Australia. Ironically, it was their free-trader ideology which indirectly assisted the cause of internationalism, for without 'coloured' workers there would have been no development of 'interracial' solidarity.

Labor's tropical experiment

When the federal Labor government took over administration of the Northern Territory in 1911, it did so in the knowledge that it was taking on South Australia's financial debts. Nevertheless, economic concerns were barely considered in the vast array of reports commissioned by the federal government. The dominant preoccupation was how to apply the White Australia policy to the Territory. The feeling at the time was that the economic consequences of shifting from 'cheap coloured' to a white only workforce, would be only temporary and that such sacrifice was worthwhile.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, p. 7251.

¹⁷*Ibid.*

¹⁸*Ibid.*, p. 7257.

Many of the policies implemented by the Fisher Labor government in their attempt to phase out 'coloured' labour resulted in economic stagnation. Colonialists argued that Darwin's three main sources of revenue, pearling, fishing and shipping were all threatened by the government's decision to remove the 'coloured' workers whose labour sustained these industries.

The first federal Administrator for the Territory, Dr. John Gilruth admitted certain doubts as to the government's northern 'experiment'. He reported in 1912 that a 'very large section of the medical profession' regarded white development of the Territory, and especially the introduction of women and children to be an impossible endeavour.¹⁹ Nineteenth century British settlers in India had avoided leaving women and children to face the fierce summer heat for fear that they might adapt to the climate and in doing so risk the degeneration of future generations.²⁰ Even as late as 1932, Herbert Basedow, speaking on the Territory, argued that the rays of the sun destroyed red cells and brought on anaemia, resulting in fatigue and melancholia.²¹ This body of medical opinion was being openly challenged by the government's attempt to settle the tropical Territory.

Three years later Gilruth admitted that their progress was 'disappointing' and added that

it must not be forgotten that no other purely tropical State has yet attempted this. I have found no evidence that any number of white people are desirous of making the necessary effort to settle permanently.

He admitted that the 'consensus of private opinion in Australia, as elsewhere', seemed to be against the possibility of development.²² By 1918 the *Northern Territory Times* had pronounced the government's attempt to develop their tropical region with white labour as 'quixotic'.²³

In 1919, after Gilruth was forcibly removed from office a Royal Commission concurred with Harold Nelson and Robert Toupein of the AWU that Gilruth had become antagonistic to the 'White Australia' policy.²⁴ Ex-Senator Staniforth Smith was sent to re-establish order and to

¹⁹Gilruth, Annual Report of the Northern Territory, p. 1, CPP, 1912.

²⁰David Walker, 'Climate, Civilization and Character in Australia, 1880-1940', in *Intellect and Emotion, Essays in Honour of Michael Roe, Australian Cultural History*, no. 16, 1997/8, p. 79.

²¹Lyn A. Riddett, 'Guarding Civilisation's Rim: The Australian Inland Mission Sisters in the Victoria River District, 1922-1939', *Journal of Australian Studies*, no. 30, September, 1991, p. 36.

²²Gilruth in Administrator Report, 1914-15, p.17, CPP.

²³*Northern Territory Times*, cited in Grenfell Price, p. 39.

²⁴*Northern Territory Times*, 9 November 1918.

assess the situation.²⁵ He concluded that the axiom 'that the tropics could never be successfully colonized by white people' was 'somewhat out of date' and that he could confirm the 'wisdom of the White Australia policy'.²⁶ He cited the findings of a Medical Congress held in Brisbane, arguing that there were no insuperable obstacles to the 'permanent occupation of tropical Australia by a healthy indigenous white race'.²⁷ But David Walker has pointed out that there remained some experts who questioned the possibility of white-only settlement, citing Griffith Taylor of Sydney University, who still insisted in 1920 that 'a tropical climate reduced that efficiency of white workers'.²⁸

Labor's insistence on using white labour put them at odds with British colonial practice. It is easy to forget that while Australia claimed to have shifted to nationhood, the British colonial attitudes towards their dependencies remained largely unchanged. In 1917 the Dominions Commission set the agenda for British tropical possessions, emphasising the need for more tropical products such as coffee and cotton. In 1926, an article appeared in an economic journal which queried Australian policy for its tropical regions, noting that 81.4 per cent of the Northern Territory was tropical and capable of farming such products.²⁹ The Northern Territory was regarded as an underdeveloped region, lacking in industry and financially non-viable. The failure to develop the Territory was blamed on the enforcement of the White Australia policy which had prevented the importation of 'coolie' labour.³⁰ According to David Johanson, pastoralists who favoured the continued use of 'coloured' labour claimed the support of prominent geographers, led by Griffith Taylor, who 'stressed climate as the inescapable determinant of all economic activity'.³¹ Even prominent politicians such as Henry Barwell, Premier of South Australia argued that

²⁵*Northern Standard*, 30 April 1921.

²⁶Smith, Administrator's Report, 1920, pp. 17-8, *CPP*.

²⁷*Ibid.*, p.18.

²⁸David Walker, *Anxious Nation*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1999, p. 149.

²⁹No Author, 'The Settlement of Northern Australia', in *The Economic Record*, May 1926, pp. 1-2, f118 3099, NARU, NT.

³⁰Rev. Gilbert White, who lived in the Territory during this period argued in favour of 'coloured' labour and a 'colour line' dividing off North Australia. Acknowledging that the Labor Party would not agree to this proposal he suggested instead the employment of '[i]ndentured coloured labour returnable after three years'. *Thirty Years in Tropical Australia*, Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, London, 1918, p. 101 and 256.

³¹Citing *Pastoralists' Review*, 15 Dec. 1909, David Johanson, 'History of the White Australia Policy', in Kenneth Rivett (ed.), *The Immigration Reform Group, Immigration: Control or Colour Bar? The Background to 'White Australia' and a Proposal for Change*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, 1962, p. 22.

developing the tropics 'by white labour was "a climatic impossibility", a blasphemous challenge to the "immutable laws of nature"'.³²

Despite these protests, the two prime export earners for the Territory, the beef and pearling industries, **had** both been allowed to continue with 'coloured' labour. Pastoralists were dependent on Aboriginal workers who, with the support of the Aborigines Ordinance of 1918, were kept in a state of semi-slavery. The pearling industry, after some debate in the 1910s, had been officially exempt from the White Australia policy and continued to import indentured divers and crew from Japan, Singapore, and the eastern islands of the Dutch East Indies.³³ This industry is discussed further in chapter eight. It was acknowledged that these industries undermined White Australia in that they employed cheap labour and yet both were supported on economic grounds by the federal government. As was indicated in Chapter three, the Labor government was quite prepared to put aside its scruples when pushed by influential capitalists.

Having based the decision to accept 'cheap coloured' labour on supposedly economic grounds, the policy was justified in such a way as to minimize the apparent impact on White Australia. In the case of Aboriginal labour, it was argued that these were neither imported nor alien labourers and that they had every right to employment in their own country. The justification for retaining their services as 'cheap' and often unpaid labour, however, rested on assumptions of 'racial' capabilities. Relying on the pseudo-science of social Darwinism it was argued that Aboriginal workers could not be expected to perform on a par with whites. Their so-called 'primitive' culture was represented as an almost insurmountable hindrance to efficient work performance. The pastoralists therefore could be represented as benevolent 'protectors' who helped in 'controlling' the Aboriginal population. While humanitarian and labour organisations protested at what was tantamount to slavery, most conservatives were content with this shallow justification.³⁴

The employment of 'alien' labour in the pearling industry relied on a completely different rationale.³⁵ In this industry, the work of diving was classified as both skilled and dangerous, and it was argued that white divers

³²Johanson, 'History of the White Australia Policy', p. 22.

³³Regina Ganter, *The Pearl-Shellers of Torres Strait, Resource Use, Development and Decline, 1860s-1960s*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, 1994, p. 100.

³⁴For studies of Aboriginal labour in the cattle industry see R. and C. Berndt, *End of an Era: Aboriginal Labour in the N.T.*, AIAS, Canberra, 1987; Dawn May, *From Bush to Station: Aboriginal Labour in the North Queensland Pastoral Industry, 1861-1897*, James Cook University Press, Townsville, 1983; and Ann McGrath, *'Born in the Cattle', Aborigines in Cattle Country*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1987.

³⁵For further discussion of the pearling industry see Chapter eight.

were not prepared, nor should they be expected, to risk their lives in such employment. Another important consideration was that indentured workers were primarily based off-shore and therefore their contact with Australian society was expected to be minimal. From the perspective of the politicians, it was vital that the public be reassured as to their support for White Australia. In 1931, Labor Minister for Home Affairs, Arthur Blakeley, also former president of the AWU, went to far as to state, that in supporting the pearl button industry the Australian public were supporting a '100% Australian industry'.³⁶ It would be interesting to know the extent to which the public was aware of the presence of 'alien' pearling crews, given this type of propaganda.

Conservatives advocate 'coloured' labour

The uncertain economic development of the Territory reached a new crisis after 1920 as the north entered into an early economic depression. In response, it was suggested that tropical agriculture should be encouraged. One writer in the conservative newspaper the *Northern Territory Times*, suggested that 'coolies' should be imported to open up this new industry.

There are many products which would grow to perfection in Australia, and particularly in the Territory, but the white man cannot do the necessary work out in the tropical sun. Even if he could, the cost of white labor in the Territory is prohibitive and this State ... will continue to languish and depopulate until the Government wakes up out of its fool dream of a White Australia and permits the country to develop in a natural and only possible way.³⁷

The union newspaper, the *Northern Standard*, described this proposal as an 'open and callous renunciation of the policy of a White Australia'. The *Standard* stated: 'It shows in its true light what slaves of Imperialism must do when it comes to the "Acid test" as between the greedy fetish and Australian patriotism.'³⁸

Another Labor supporter complained that Britain still believed that 'white man cannot work and maintain his health in the tropics'. The writer

³⁶Arthur Blakeley, Draft Statement for publicity, 'Australian Pearl Shell — Its value in Button Industry', Note that at that time Burns Philp owned a MOP Buttons factory, Letter to F. J. Quinlan, 24 November 1931, A1/15 1931/1339, AA ACT.

³⁷*Northern Territory Times* cited in *Northern Standard*, 19 March 1921.

³⁸*Northern Standard*, 19 March 1921.

spoke of proposals to introduce 'coolies into the Northern Territory' arguing that only the 'landowner, manufacturer, and merchant' would be enriched.³⁹ Nevertheless there were many who believed that such a plan was necessary. In 1915, Sir Henry Galway, the newly appointed State Governor, called for the Northern Territory to 'be developed by black labor'. He was severely criticised by the AWU for interfering with the White Australia policy and accused of taking part in party politics.⁴⁰ Apparently the issue of 'coloured' labour and White Australia continued to be debated between the political parties — again we see that it was **not** a national, bipartisan policy.

In 1922, the London newspapers took up the debate over the White Australia policy and Barwell, Premier of South Australia advocated the 'development of the Northern Territory by means of indentured Asiatic labor, strictly confined to the tropical areas and under heavy punishment if employed outside.'⁴¹ The conservative editor of the *Northern Territory Times*, J. A. Porter, stated that the Territory workers were of 27 nationalities and '99 per cent of them I.W.W., nihilists, bolsheviks or men of that sort'. He claimed that the Territory might advance simply by 'expunging from the Statute Book that stupid law which prohibits the importation of Chinese labour'.⁴²

By 1922 loyal Labor advocates were concerned that their White Australia policy was endangered. One writer warned that few realised the 'widespread and deep-seated treachery against our religion of Race Purity'. Pointing to the upsurge in Imperialism he wrote:

There are men at the present day holding high official positions in Australia who prate of loyalty with their lips whilst their hearts are full of the blackest treason towards the country. ... we have reached a point of our history where loyalty to Imperialism is treason to Australia. ... In a hundred different directions Imperial propagandists are endeavoring to 'white-ant' our White Australian policy ...⁴³

This suggestion that the 'Imperialists' continued to pay lip-service to White Australia is important. It was this very act of deception which has prevented

³⁹J. P. Johnson, 'Why I believe in a White Australia', in *Northern Standard*, 16 June 1921.

⁴⁰Official Report of the 29th Annual Convention, 1915, p. 50, AWU Deposit, NBAC/ANU

⁴¹'White Australia', *Northern Standard*, 10 March 1922.

⁴²Porter in 'The Pastoral Review' cited in *Northern Standard*, 14 March 1922.

⁴³'How White Australia was won', *Northern Standard*, 8 August 1922.

historians from recognising the extent to which White Australia was being questioned in the 1920s.

Those writing from England, however, could afford to be more openly critical. In 1926 Fleetwood Chidell wrote a monograph in which he criticised the White Australia policy. He argued that in a crowded planet there could be no toleration of 'untilled fields under any pretext whatsoever.'⁴⁴ Chidell continued to believe that in tropical agriculture such as in northern Queensland, the climatic conditions were not agreeable to the 'Anglo-Saxon' and that the 'Australian could not 'hold his own with the immigrant from Southern Europe. The Southern European, again, would be beaten by the tropical Asiatic.' He believed that white men could work in the tropics only if they were protected from foreign competition.⁴⁵ Citing a letter titled 'The "White Australia" Fanatic' in *United Empire*, he concluded that white workers in the tropics was an impossible commercial proposition.⁴⁶

The new variation on the climatic determinist theme was that white workers would suffer from the heat more than 'coloured' workers and that they would necessarily require higher wages, referred to as a 'tropical allowance'. It was suggested that extra luxuries were needed to make life more bearable and more breaks from work required to avoid overheating. Climatic determinism was not a clear-cut science — it was used as a means to achieve political ends; colonials cited climatic determinism while White Australianists attempted to find scientific remedies for the debilitating effects of living in the tropics.

Chidell's proposal for Northern Australia returned to earlier colonial proposals which had called for a division of north and south Australia. He proposed that the Territory be developed under 'Japanese supervision and with the help of Chinese and Indian labour'. In order to maintain the two main principles of White Australia, those being 'the maintenance of a high standard of living and the preservation of racial integrity', he suggested drawing a frontier above which labour might be imported and 'whites' would take positions as overseers.⁴⁷ He was, in fact, arguing for a return to a model of 'plantation' colonialism.

It was not only Australian and British capitalists who advocated the continued use of 'cheap coloured' labour in the Territory. This view was shared by the Territory's Chinese merchants. Darwin business was dominated in 1911 by a strong association of Chinese merchants. These

⁴⁴Fleetwood Chidell, *Australia - White or Yellow?*, William Heinemann, London, 1926, p. 94.

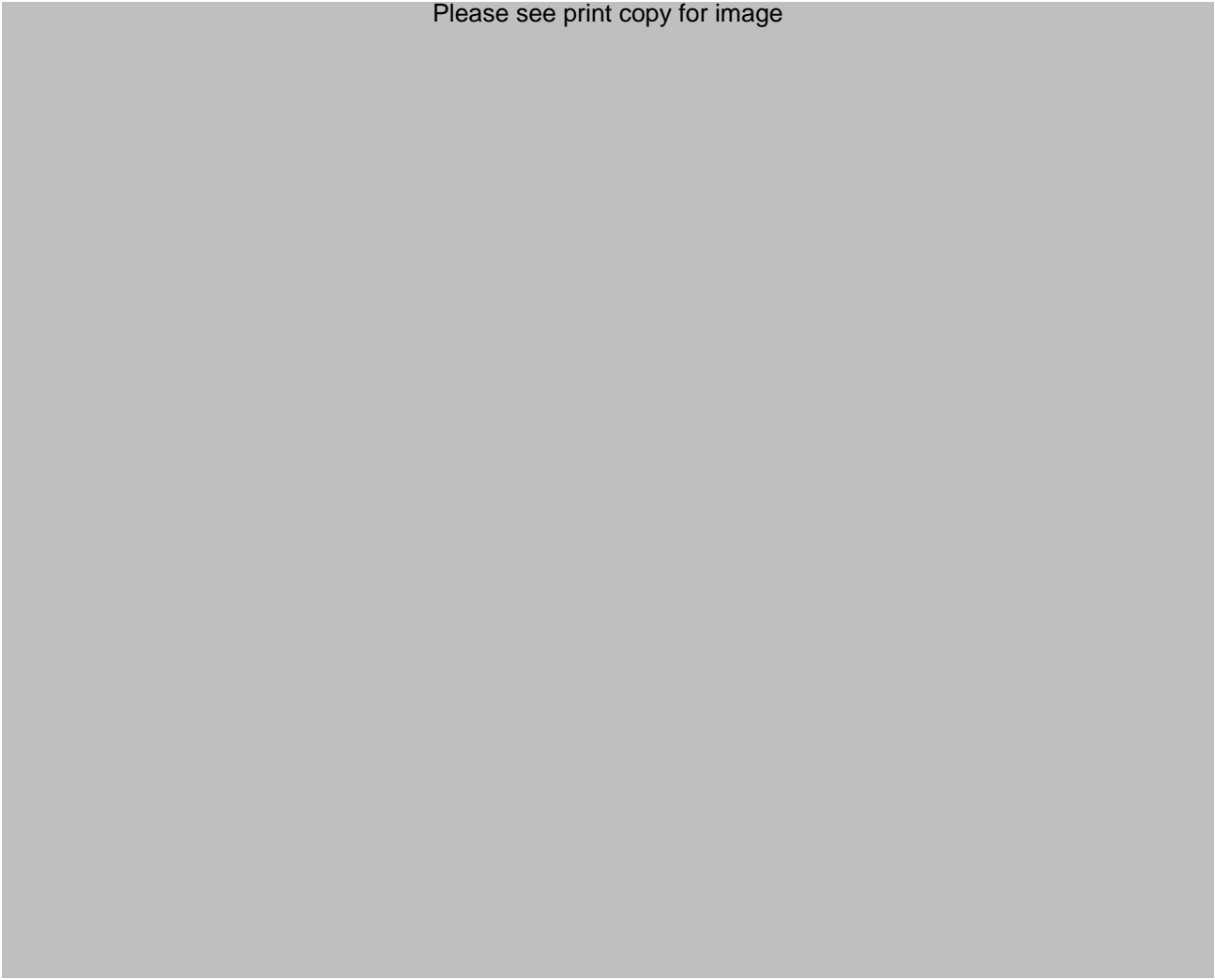
⁴⁵*Ibid.*, p. 145.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, p. 147.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, pp. 149-50.

Vice-regal group, 1905.
(PH0002/0164, Roger Nott Collection, Northern Territory Library)

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wealthy Chinese, such as the Yam Yans had been influential under the South Australian government, their financial contribution to the town giving them certain privileges. Despite being hard hit by the advent of Commonwealth rule, they retained sufficient capital to be in a position to finance tropical agriculture. In 1917 at a social gathering for the Administrator, Dr. Gilruth, the chairman of the Darwin Wa Hon society, Ah Cheong, spoke on behalf of the Chinese business community. A proposal of prominent business man, Man Fong Lau (or Lee Chow), was put forward as a solution for the economic troubles of the Territory. He suggested that Darwin be made a free port to attract the 'Commerce of the World' and that the northern portion of Australia be shut off from the rest and within this area labour be allowed to enter freely.⁴⁸

In a similar vein, in 1921, a deputation of Chinese merchants approached the government asking for permission to indent 'suitable labour from China for the purpose of working mines, growing cotton, rice or other tropical products.' They argued that their request to 'indent coolie labour' did not interfere with the White Australia policy as these workers would not 'be brought in to work in competition with white labour in the Territory.' They argued for the economic benefits of cheap labour and pointed to the continued use of indented labour in the pearling industry, arguing,

it has never been suggested that the practice should be stopped, for it is well known that the industry would entirely shut down and thus divert a large amount of capital from Australia.

In order to allay any fears that the government might hold as to the increase in Chinese population, they stressed that the government 'would have power to deport the immigrants at the end of their term and prevent any further lots arriving'.⁴⁹ Their request, however, was denied. The justifications used for the pearling and beef industries could not be applied to 'alien' Chinese workers.

Sending a message in tones of rebuke, the Darwin Chinese informed the Minister in 1921 that:

It is a fact, though probably an unpalatable one, that white coolie labour in the Territory has proved an expensive failure. As the wages

⁴⁸H. Dowsett, in *Adelaide Advertiser*, 3 August 1917, A1/15 30/6111, AA ACT.

⁴⁹Deputation from Darwin Merchants to Poynton, Minister for Home and Territories, 4 June 1921, A1/1 1931/8945, AA ACT.

have gone up on a sliding scale, during recent years, so the efficiency in quality and quantity of work has gone down.⁵⁰

The use of the word 'coolies' by the Chinese merchants to describe labour in the 1920s indicated their belief in the traditional hierarchy of class distinction. For them, all workers were 'coolies' regardless of race. They assumed that capital must present a united front, bridging barriers of race in order to keep control over labour. The government denied their request for indentured labour. No doubt their comments on 'white coolies' were not well received. In a supposed 'workers' paradise', the term 'white coolies' was an oxymoron, carrying unacceptable connotations of servitude for those who believed in white supremacy.

John Ingleson, writing on Java, discusses the distinction between race consciousness and class consciousness. He considers how workers in twentieth-century China had organised against Chinese capitalists and had developed a sense of class consciousness in opposing the rigid class system of imperial China.⁵¹ In Indonesia, in contrast, Javanese workers expressed their antagonism towards Chinese and European capitalist alike in terms of 'race consciousness' and themselves were consigned to the role of 'coolie' on the basis of their lower status in the imagined 'racial' hierarchy.⁵² Racial hierarchy therefore could strengthen the division between labour and capital. In Australia, any such alliance of capital was constantly undermined by the need for white capitalists to assert their 'racial' superiority.

Despite this rejection of the Chinese proposal, there was a degree of class alliance between Australian conservatives and Chinese merchants, and indeed with Japanese merchants. In 1916 the influential Secretary of the Department of External Affairs, Atlee Hunt wrote on the Japanese:

My own view is that it would be well to consider this question so that at the end of the war we may be prepared, without any request coming from the Japanese Government, to remove any very limited restrictions that we are now imposing on their mercantile representatives. During the 14 years that have elapsed since the law was passed there has never been any indication that the Japanese Government wished to force their labouring classes on us.

⁵⁰Darwin Merchants, 4 June 1921.

⁵¹John Ingleson, *In Search of Justice, Workers and Unions in Colonial Java, 1908-1926*, Oxford University Press, Singapore, 1986, p. 6.

⁵²*Ibid.*, p. 7.

Hunt then alludes to the dissension within the Hughes ministry over the administration of White Australia, suggesting that the Ministers inform Billy Hughes of the 'consensus of opinion of his colleagues'.⁵³ In fact, it was only after 1922, when Hughes was no longer Prime Minister, that the calls for indentured labour were able to be voiced openly at government levels and such alliances could be openly formed.

The subtle change which followed the change in government in 1923, can be seen in the reports of the Administrator of the Northern Territory, Frederick Urquhart, who took up his position in 1920. His initial report displayed the fervent White Australian attitude which one would expect at this time. His predecessor Gilruth had fallen out of favour with the paranoid Prime Minister Hughes over his supposedly traitorous anti-White Australian tendencies and his support for Chinese business. Urquhart, in contrast, reported that,

business is very depressed, there being only one Australian firm of storekeepers left in Darwin, the trade in general merchandise having fallen largely into the hands of Chinese firms, who by reason of the cheap labour of their compatriots, are enabled to compete at an advantage with Australian merchants. This, though regrettable, is apparently unavoidable, as many of the Chinese are either native born or of very long Australian domicile ...⁵⁴

In 1924, Urquhart presented quite a different kind of report. Rather than blaming the Chinese for the depression in business, he commented on the increase in revenue of £3554 due to the export of fish to British Malaya and China. Now in full support of Chinese enterprise, he noted that this 'is remarkable progress for an embryo industry carried on chiefly by Chinese and other coloured men with hardly any capital and with primitive appliances'.⁵⁵ Perhaps his four years in Darwin had given him a better understanding of conditions there. Even if this were so, it is doubtful that he would have written the report in this fashion, were it not being sent to the Bruce Government rather than Hughes.

Under the conservative government of the mid-1920s there was a pronounced shift towards colonial-style solutions to economic difficulties. In 1928, the Government Resident for the Northern Territory, Lieutenant-

⁵³Hunt to Mahon, 9 February 1916, MS 52, 52/1523, NLA.

⁵⁴Administrator Urquhart, Annual Report of the Northern Territory, p. 4, *CPP*, 1920.

⁵⁵Administrator Urquhart, Annual Report of the Northern Territory, *CPP*, 1924.

Colonel R. H. Weddell, advocated the resumption of indentured labour. He stated that the 'introduction of a number of Asiatics under proper regulation would go far to solve the labor problem' and that he believed that 'members of Parliament themselves would be convinced of the wisdom of a modified 'White Australia' policy if they could live in Darwin for a few months'.⁵⁶

Yet another of the administrative staff in Darwin, C. P. Conigrave, who had lived in the Territory for fifteen years, spoke to the Legacy Club on 'The Problem of Northern Australia', stating:

We cannot solve the problem of the North until we as a nation accept the fact that the good Lord has made colored people and that they are more fitted to work nearer the equator than whites. Some fine day, perhaps in ten years, or fifty years, or a hundred years, our White Australia policy is going to be tested. We shall not be allowed to hang on to Northern Australia unless we make better efforts to people it.⁵⁷

The tendency for government reports to speak out against White Australia became more pronounced by the 1930s. Writing in 1930 on the 'problems' of the Northern Territory, Grenfell Price launched a scathing attack on the White Australia policy. He blamed government interference and the White Australia policy for condemning the Territory to economic stagnation.⁵⁸ He argued that the only possible means of developing the Territory was to have given the capitalists '*carte blanche* as to coloured labour'. Price described the White Australia policy as 'utterly unscientific and weird foolishness', and European labour as expensive and 'utterly hopeless'.⁵⁹ He referred to Deakin's statement in 1901 that Australia 'must face any sacrifice, and delay the development of her tropics to any extent rather than incur 'the trials, sufferings, and losses that nearly wrecked the great Republic of the West'.⁶⁰ Thirty years on, and in the middle of a world-wide depression, Price argued that such 'noble' sentiments no longer had salience in government circles. Development was presented as desirable at any cost, and colonial practices of exploitation of 'cheap coloured' labour were deemed to be the appropriate solution.

⁵⁶*The Herald*, 28 April 1928, cited in *Northern Standard*, 18 May 1928.

⁵⁷'White Australia Policy Attacked, Darwin Official's Address', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 22 June 1928 reprinted in *Northern Standard*, 3 August 1928.

⁵⁸A. Grenfell Price, *The History and Problems of the Northern Territory, Australia*, 1930, p. 11, North Australia Collection, Northern Territory Library.

⁵⁹*Ibid.*, p. 30.

⁶⁰*Ibid.*, p. 31.

Price regarded the indenture system as the only possible solution, but bemoaned that 'the White Australia policy stands as a hopeless barrier in the way'.⁶¹ Price described this 'first effort of the Europeans in a southern continent to develop by white labour their own tropical zone' as 'the greatest biological experiment in history'.⁶² Nor was Price alone in his views. In 1934, Sir James Barrett, wrote that: 'Every thoughtful Australian must admit that the policy of economic nationalism and State socialism is preventing more rapid development'. He believed though that there were signs of reaction against such a policy and a return to development by private enterprise. He described the Aboriginal population in the Territory as a 'useful people when employed in the raising of stock, etc.'⁶³ His argument in favour of 'coloured' labour was not so much based on racial theory, which was being questioned at this time. Taking his cue from anthropologists, he acknowledged that while 'the coloured man working in the tropics has no physiological advantage over the white man' cultural differences allow the 'coloured man' to work more comfortably. He gave the example of a Malay worker who shows 'greater wisdom and discards his clothes and consequently aids the adjustment of his bodily temperature'.⁶⁴

Overseas critics continued to press the government to change its policy. Professor Chin, the new Consul-General for China in Australia was quite emphatic in stating in 1931, that 'soon Australia must open up its empty spaces in the north to a regulated scheme of Chinese and general Eastern immigration'. He warned that China was not the only country looking 'longingly at Australia's undeveloped lands'; that Japan too felt strongly about the matter and that Japanese press frequently criticised the White Australia policy.⁶⁵

Macquisten, a member of the House of Commons from County Argyle wrote in 1936, that although he was 'a champion of the white Australia policy', he 'had been astounded to see white men doing coolies work at Darwin'. He was reported as stating that:

In a tropical country, it seemed to him to be entirely contrary to nature, and he doubted if any but the temperate parts of Australia could ever be seriously considered for settlement entirely by white

⁶¹*Ibid.*, p. 54.

⁶²*Ibid.*, p. 56.

⁶³Sir James Barrett, 'Tropical Australia', *The Australian Quarterly*, 14 March 1934, Volume 6, p. 67, NARU, f138 3645.

⁶⁴*Ibid.*, p. 72.

⁶⁵*Northern Standard*, 31 February 1931.

people. People could not be surprised at the fact that Europeans and other nations were commencing to remind Australia that she was not utilising her empty northern lands.⁶⁶

Thus, by the late 1930s, the voice of protest against White Australia and its white labour policy had grown strong and this was primarily due to the waning of Labor's political power.

A 1932 article in the *Sydney Morning Herald* regarded these colonial attitudes towards the Northern Territory as a threat to the unity and nationhood of Australia:

Properly regarded, the very existence of a name like 'Territory' at all is a matter for regret and anxiety. It means that there exists a part of Australia — and no very small part, either — which is not in the full sense Australian, a part which though not essentially differing in character from its neighbours, is politically different, something apart, something inferior.⁶⁷

Clearly by the 1930s, there was a general consensus that the federal government has failed in its plan to include the Territory in White Australia.

The *Labor Daily* responded to the renewed colonial interest in the north, describing a 'sinister plan' by the Lyons-Bruce Government to give the Territory to private enterprise to be developed as a 'gigantic coolie slave state'. This plan they argued would be 'a menace to White Australia, but a buttress of capitalist imperialism in these days of a crumbling social system.' As with debates some thirty years prior, they argued that importing Indian or Chinese workers would create 'racial conflict' and warned that Fiji provided an ominous warning of the results of such a policy.⁶⁸ It is significant that the White Australian perspective was once again being presented as a voice of protest in opposition to government policy. This defensive positioning alone tells us the degree to which advocates of White Australia were being marginalised.

⁶⁶Cited in *Sydney Morning Herald*, 22 February 1936.

⁶⁷'The Northern Territory', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 1 August 1932 cited in *Northern Standard*, 23 August 1932.

⁶⁸*Labor Daily* 2 August 1932 cited in *Northern Standard*, 23 August 1932.

The 1937 Commonwealth Report

The years from 1934-1939 in Australia were dominated by the conservative Country Party. Responsibility for the Northern Territory fell to the Minister for the Interior in Canberra, Thomas Paterson (1934-37) and John McEwen (1937-39) who were both conservative politicians as was the Administrator in Darwin, C. L. A. Abbott.⁶⁹ By the late 1930s, criticism of White Australia had reached a level where it could be incorporated officially into government policy. The 1937 Payne and Fletcher report on the Northern Territory demonstrates that the government paid no more than lip-service to the White Australia policy. It began with a ritual confirmation of White Australia:

In the various schemes of development recommended throughout this report, we have kept in mind the need for maintenance in its inviolability of the national policy of a White Australia. This is something which the Australian people regard as sacrosanct. All the States, all political parties, and all sections of the people are united in an ardent desire to maintain racial purity. Cheap or coloured labour cannot be allowed to become permanently established in Australia. There can be no compromise on this fundamental principle. Australia is prepared to stand or fall by its great ideal.⁷⁰

This nationalist rhetoric was still regarded as necessary in order for the government to appear 'politically correct'. Nevertheless, the report goes on to advocate the use of indentured 'coloured' labour for the Territory. The introduction is revealed as little more than a thin veil covering their real intent. If our historical understanding of this period continues to be dominated by images of White Australia, it is because too much emphasis has been placed on the rhetoric and insufficient attention paid to the message.

The content of the report echoes the logic of colonial capitalism; that 'cheap coloured' labour equals profit:

The pearling industry has been of considerable benefit to the town of Darwin. During the five years, 1st July, 1931 to 30th June, 1936, it

⁶⁹Andrew Markus, *Governing Savages*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1990, p. 130.

⁷⁰Payne and Fletcher, 'Report of the Board of Inquiry into Land and Land Industries of the Northern Territory of Australia', 10 October 1937, Part VIII, The Government of the Territory, The White Australia Policy, p. 71, *CPP*, 1937-40, Volume III.

produced to a total value of £245,820, the returns varying from £40,000 to £71,000 per annum. ... The pearling boats are manned by indentured labour, the crews generally comprising about six Japanese and three Malays to each boat. Indentured labour has always been allowed for this work.⁷¹

The emphasis on profit overshadowed any concern regarding the use of indentured labour. There is no hint of the outrage that would have been voiced by any 'ardent' White Australian in 1911. Rather, indentured labour they state, 'has always been allowed', a phrase which conveniently obliterated the six years of debate over whether the industry would be allowed to retain its indentured workers.

While the government accepted the Payne and Fletcher report as policy, there was one voice of dissent. Hughes, then Minister for External Affairs, claimed that there had been 'too much of this sort of thing lately' and that this would be 'the end of the White Australia policy'. True to form, he predicted that if 'coloured people' were confined to the northern part of the continent

there would be a border 3000 miles long and infiltration in the south would be inevitable and miscegenation would make itself felt, and we would no longer be a white but a piebald nation.⁷²

The essential difference in Hughes' vision of Australia, as opposed to the British or conservative view, was that as a nationalist, he regarded the continent as one entity which encompassed the Australian nation. He could not envisage any partition to undermine the integrity of the nation, nor could his racist paranoia stand to have a 'coloured' population in such close proximity.

The Payne and Fletcher report did not suggest the large scale importation of labour for agricultural development in the form of 'plantation' colonialism. Rather, they situated the need for indentured labour in terms of supporting the settlement of a white population. While acknowledging that white workers might work in the tropics without ill effects, they turned their attention to the 'white women without whom there would be no self-producing white population. The report stated: 'If the tropical coastlands of North Australia are to be permanently settled by white

⁷¹*Ibid.*, Part X, The Pearling Industry, p. 76

⁷²*Northern Standard*, 22 July 1938.

people, the health of females becomes a matter of primary concern.' In particular they spoke of the need for more fresh green vegetables for their high iron content to prevent women from becoming anaemic. The report directly criticised earlier attempts to suppress Chinese enterprises:

When the Territory was taken over by the Commonwealth a number of Chinese gardens were in existence around Darwin, which supplied the inhabitants with green vegetables and fruit. Gardening by Chinese, however, was not encouraged by the Administration, and soon all these operations ceased. ... the speediest method of solution would be to permit a limited number of Chinese gardeners to be indentured so that these gardens might be commenced afresh. Unless the health of the people is guarded, the White Australia policy will be endangered.⁷³

Thus even when they opposed White Australia, the conservatives were careful to phrase their policies in such a way as to suggest that they still supported the general project of encouraging the development of the white population.

Conclusion

We view the voice of White Australia as the voice of the Australian people during the first half of the twentieth century; the symbol of Australian national identity. But this examination of the colonial opposition demonstrates that the monolithic voice of White Australia had grown feeble by the mid 1920s. The force of White Australian discourse, which we have interpreted as a sign of its dominance, can conversely be viewed as a defensive strategy against attack. The obvious continuity between the past policies of the Territory as a 'mixed' colony and the twentieth century conservative position renders impotent the entire nationalist project of White Australia in the tropics. This chapter has shown both British and Australian representations in which the policy is belittled and scorned, and ultimately rejected in the name of 'economic development'.

These three chapters have compared the opposing views of White Australian, internationalist and colonialists on the subject of 'coloured' labour for the Northern Territory. Placed in this political context, the views

⁷³Payne and Fletcher Report, p. 72.

of White Australian advocates are seen as being specifically connected to the ideological stance of the Labor Party. After the 1920s, neither the communists, nor the liberal free-traders could be described as advocates of the policy. What has been presented to us as a dominant discourse is little more than a repeated refrain which had long since ceased to have any real power. Having said that, there was no move to change the restrictive immigration policy in any radical fashion. The questioning of White Australia was limited in this sense. It centred on two opposing projects: on the one hand the capitalists, using colonial notions, wished to exploit 'coloured' labour for tropical enterprises; on the other the internationalists sought to undermine their project by questioning the notion that 'coloured' workers were inherently cheap.

PART TWO

'Coloured' Workers in Plural Australia

The second section of this thesis is made up of four case studies: Aboriginal servants; so-called 'half-caste' waterside workers; indentured Japanese and 'Malay' pearling crews; and Chinese workers. These have been chosen as the main employment groups of 'coloured' labour in Port Darwin. To some extent these groups are characterised by ethnicity, but more importantly, each case represents a slightly different mode of employment and a different approach to the use of 'coloured' labour under White Australia.

Each case study provides a micro-history of the four main 'coloured' groups within Darwin and considers the degree to which they interacted with the white population, in particular with the white working-class population. Andrew Markus, in his *Australian Race Relations*, noted that it was difficult to determine the extent to which segregation was a part of the Australian approach to the non-European population. Segregation, he argued was the 'result of local practice rather than state or federal legislation'. With this in mind, the following chapters examine the social integration of the 'coloured' population of Darwin, highlighting in the process the complex and varied dynamics of Australian 'race' relations.

Christopher Saunders, in comparing the port towns of Cape Town and New Orleans, examined labour relations in multi-racial societies. It had been suggested by George Fredrickson in his pioneering study of United States and South Africa, that these cities represented sites of 'race mixing and fluidity', making them different from other towns where strict segregation was practised. These comments could equally be applied to Darwin. Taking up the issue of segregation and integration, what I have described as a plural paradigm is not merely the study of multi-racial societies, but more specifically their tendency towards integration rather than segregation.¹ Integration can of course be linked to assimilation, and

¹Cape Town is renowned for being 'different', especially in comparison with Johannesburg, where segregation was far more pronounced. This rather romantic notion should not be taken too far. 'Racial' inequalities were present, but the ambivalent status of the 'Coloured' population blurred the 'colour line'. See Nancy Murray and Marco Garrido, 'Somewhere over the rainbow: a journey to the new South Africa', *Race and Class*, Vol. 38, January-March 1997, no. 3, p. 20. For a more detailed historical study of Cape Town see J. V. Bickford-Smith, *Ethnic Pride and Racial Prejudice in Victorian Cape Town*, Cambridge, 1995; Christopher Saunders, 'Race, Class and Labour in two port cities: Some Cape Town and New Orleans Comparisons', paper presented at Racialising Class, Classifying Race, Oxford, July 1997; George Frederickson, *White Supremacy*, New York, 1981, pp. 258, 260.

therefore could equally be described as an oppressive policy. My concern, however, is to examine, not so much official policy, but the drift towards inter-ethnic cooperation which developed at a local community level. The examination of this aspect of 'race' relations necessarily involves taking a labour history, or history-from-below approach.

Contemporary images of Darwin were usually framed in terms of separate ethnic enclaves. Ernestine Hill, described Darwin in 1919 as being comprised of:

Greektown, Tokyo Town, Little Russia, a Latin quarter of Spaniards, Italians and Maltese were dotted about the headland with a Manila Town, Malay village, some new tints in half-castes and the usual straggle of blacks.²

Hill's Darwin was not a single community, but many 'ethnic' communities, but I would question whether the local residents imagined themselves in this fashion.

While previous chapters have considered broader political ideologies in relation to 'coloured' labour, this section will focus on the personal experiences of those who made up the Darwin community. This style of historical analysis is important if we are to understand the complex relationship between everyday personal interactions and notions of national identity. Ethnicity, on the other hand, is not the only consideration when considering notions of community. Richard White argues that national identity should be recognised as only one form of identity amidst multiple identities:

For most people, other identities — being a woman, being a builder's labourer, being a teenager, being a Catholic, being a skinhead or a Liberal voter or an Italian speaker, being part of a family, an organisation, a local community, in an occupation — are far more immediate and far more important in day-to-day life than being an Australian. Aspects of those identities are 'invented' too, but they emerge much more out of the experience of everyday life and day-to-day social dealings.³

²Ernestine Hill, *The Territory: A Sprawling Saga of Australia's Tropic North*, Angus and Robertson Publishers, Sydney, 1951, p. 289.

³Richard White 'Inventing Australia revisited', in Wayne Hudson and Geoffrey Bolton (eds.), *Changing Australian History, Creating Australia*, Allen & Unwin, St Leonards, 1997, pp. 19-20.

During the first half of the twentieth century, those who were fervently loyal to White Australia were not simply White Australians. They were also allied to many other forms of group identity, some of which included 'coloured' residents. Thus these case studies consider the influence of the workplace, of the pub, of the football field and of the church in shaping attitudes to 'coloured' residents.

Chapter six presents the case of Aboriginal servants, taking up the themes of colonialism discussed in Chapter Five. The employment of the indigenous peoples as servants had no place in the official imaginings of White Australia, and yet it was encouraged by those in power. The Aboriginal Department deliberately avoided modern workplace solutions in the mistaken belief that a pre-modern framework best suited the Aboriginal community who were deemed 'racially' incapable of integrating into modern Australia.

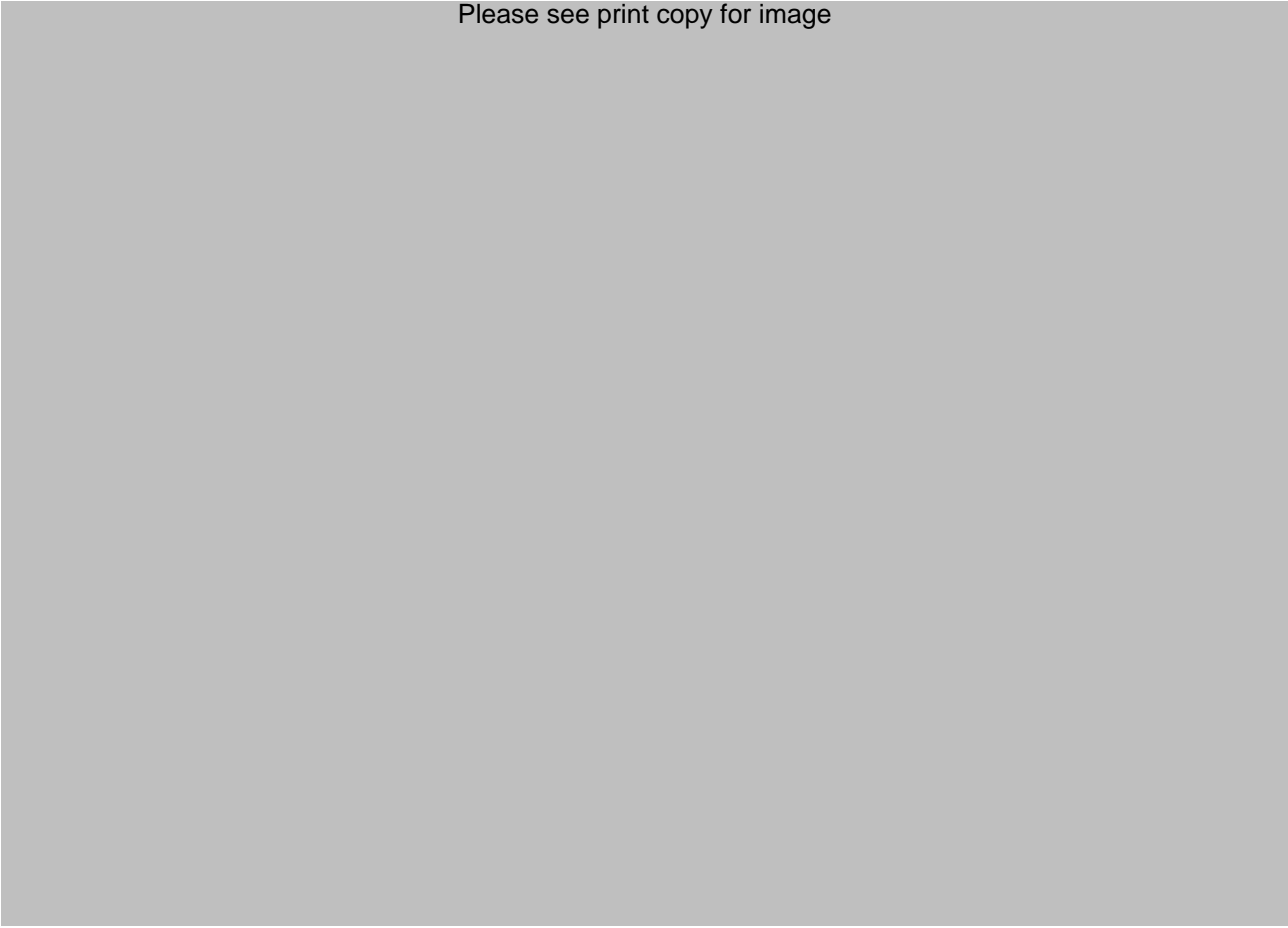
Chapter seven considers the Asian indentured pearlers who were similarly employed outside the boundaries of White Australia. The system of contract labour that persisted into the twentieth century was undoubtedly an anachronism in Australia. Their case, however, was quite different from that of Aboriginal servants in that the pearling crews had more control over their working conditions and wages. Despite this they were the target of a sustained union campaign against the continued use of 'coolie' labour.

In Chapter eight, the 'half-caste' waterside workers of Port Darwin are considered as the primary example of unionised 'coloured' labour. This group highlights the widening concept of the 'white' worker, and the possibility of modifying what began as a strictly exclusionary ideology into one of acceptance, albeit within the context of cultural assimilation.

Chapter nine focuses on the young Australian-born Chinese. It is not appropriate to consider this group in the context of any one occupation as they were only rarely employed as wage-labourers under the White Australia policy. Instead they made their living in various self-employed business ventures ranging from street vending to merchant trading. In terms of employment opportunities, the Chinese, more than any other ethnic group, suffered under the implementation of White Australia.

Group of servants.
(PH0412/0020, J. A. Austin Collection, Northern Territory Library)

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Chapter six

Aboriginal servants

This chapter considers the employment of Aboriginal domestic servants in Darwin from 1911 to 1940. Despite White Australia's apparent rejection of colonial style 'slavery', the employment of Aboriginal servants can be understood to be a part of this centuries-old colonial tradition. Aboriginal wages were negligible and their lives were subject to strict authoritarian control. Most importantly, this lowly status was deemed to be proper as it was determined by European belief in 'racial' hierarchy and the supposed inherent inequalities between the 'races'. Contemporary explanations of this anomaly within White Australia argued that 'coloured' servants were necessary for the functioning of Darwin as a tropical administrative centre. For most officials there was a lingering desire to preserve a British colonial social structure in which class and race defined status. From the perspective of Darwin's unionists, such colonial aspirations were the antithesis of White Australian nationalism. How was it then, that the exploitation of Aboriginal workers did not provoke stronger criticism?

Darwin as a tropical colony?

The employment of 'coloured' domestic servants was an accepted practice in Darwin since the town's establishment in 1869. By 1871, with the connection of the London-Australia telegraph line by the British-Australian Telegraph Company or B.A.T., British colonial culture gained a firm hold on Darwin society. The staff of the B.A.T. formed an exclusive club. According to Douglas Lockwood, they were 'Top Dogs':

They were Englishmen to the bootstraps who brought their servants from the East. The officers and their ladies rode around in private buggies ... At night they had Aborigines walking ahead to light their way.⁴

⁴Douglas Lockwood, *The Front Door, Darwin, 1869-1969*, Angus & Robertson, London, 1969, p. 93.

In this colonial culture, Chinese or Malay servants were considered necessary to preserve the prestige and comfort of the British colonists. Aboriginal servants were incorporated into this social structure, generally taking on the more arduous or menial tasks, their status being below that of so-called 'eastern' servants.

The introduction of the *Immigration Restriction Act* in 1901 deprived this elite of their 'eastern' servants. One of the unexpected side effects of the new legislation was that it enabled young Chinese workers to leave the Northern Territory and move to Australia's southern states. By 1910, according to S. J. Mitchell, the last South Australian Administrator, those Chinese left were able to demand 'abnormally high' wages. He regarded this as a serious problem for the expanded white settlement as white women would no longer be able to obtain Chinese servants. Mitchell argued:

As there are almost no white domestic servants in the Territory, many house-wives cannot afford the luxury of a help, except that of an aboriginal. This is one of the reasons why women do not like living in the Territory. The lot of the ordinary house-wife is toilsome, and, especially in the wet season, very trying.⁵

Aboriginal servants, therefore were represented as the only possible alternative to Chinese servants. The fact that Mitchell was in favour of 'coloured' servants at all, was quite at odds with the fundamental principal of the White Australia policy which envisaged a white-only workforce. It was only by regarding the tropics as a special case that such deviation was allowed.

If one considers the rhetoric of Free-traders in the 1901 White Australia debate, discussed in chapter five, there was a tendency to represent northern, tropical Australia as intrinsically unsuited to the White Australia policy. Climatic conditions were used to justify the need for 'coloured' labour in the tropics in order to protect the white population from the undue physical stress of manual labour. White women in particular were regarded as vulnerable to the debilitating effects of the heat, and as the mothers of the white nation, their health was to be protected by the employment of suitable labour.⁶ According to colonial tradition, it was

⁵Report of the Administrator of the Northern Territory, 1910, p. 7, *Commonwealth Parliamentary Papers (CPP)*.

⁶David Walker, *Anxious Nation*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1999, p. 141.

presumed that 'coloured' labour was suited by virtue of their supposed 'racial' adaptation to the tropics.

When the Commonwealth took over the administration of the Northern Territory in 1911, the Fisher Labor government intended to implement their white labour policy. In practice, the majority of administrative staff who were sent north to Darwin were lukewarm in their approach to White Australia. Most southerners expected to receive some compensation for leaving behind the comforts of the 'civilised' south. The Administrator, Dr. John Gilruth bemoaned the sacrifice he had made, having to leave 'a University chair in the important City of Melbourne for life in a tropic village'.⁷ In precisely the manner of British colonials being sent to a tropical outpost, the administrative staff expected 'coloured' servants to perform their housekeeping, cooking and gardening as compensation for their willingness to suffer arduous conditions.

During the period of Labor administration, any who argued in favour of 'coloured' servants were regarded as traitors to the cause, and Gilruth's reputation was irreparably damaged by his own blatant employment of 'coloured' servants. He was ultimately the subject of a Royal Commission that affirmed his disloyalty to White Australia.⁸ In his own defense, Gilruth pointed out that Chinese servants in Darwin were far from cheap. In 1912 he had defended his decision to employ a Chinese cook, writing:

It is only now, nearly a month after my arrival, that I have been able to secure a cook of any kind and am forced to pay a Chinaman £10 a month and keep, and further, to take the first that offers!⁹

Evidently there was some divergence between policy and practice.

Despite these allegations against Gilruth, he rejected any notion that the tropical climate of Darwin made it unsuited to white labour. Bending his scientific 'expertise' to the political needs of the day, he argued that:

One of the chief obstacles to the white development of the Territory, and especially to the introduction of white women and children, may prove to be the hostility shown by a very large section of the medical profession to the attempted development of any part of the

⁷Gilruth to W. M. Hughes, Prime Minister, Melbourne, 24 June 1920, regarding the report of the Royal Commissioner, Justice Ewing on Gilruth's administration, A1/15 30/6111, National Archives of Australia, AA ACT).

⁸The Royal Commission on Northern Territory Administration, 1920.

⁹Gilruth, Administrator to Minister for External Affairs, 10 May 1912, A1/15 1912/10547, AA ACT.

world's tropics by white labour, and the insistence that no tropical climate is suitable for white women and children. It seems somewhat curious how persistently it is made in the absence of any complete data confirming that opinion, for, so far as I can ascertain, no sustained attempt has ever been made to colonize any part of the tropics solely by whites.¹⁰

This statement, made in 1912, went against accepted medical wisdom in order to justify the White Australia project.

In 1917, a year when White Australian sentiment was at its height, Justice Powers declared in the federal Arbitration Court that:

White Australia does not extend to Darwin. Aboriginal labour is widely employed, and it is said some labour officials employ aboriginals sometimes because of excessive Darwin temperature in summer, ... and the high paid Government officials and employers employ Chinese or other coloured labour, generally speaking for domestic service.¹¹

For Justice Powers, the tropics were beyond White Australia; the 'whiteness' of the south had failed to reach tropical Darwin.¹²

In fact, the employment of Aboriginal labour, both in domestic service and other occupations was an Australia-wide phenomenon. It was not unique to the Northern Territory, nor even restricted to tropical Australia. In Sydney for example, according to Inara Walden, Aboriginal girls were 'indentured into servitude for wealthy families'. Some 570 girls were apprenticed out in the period from the 1910s to the 1930s.¹³ Jennifer Sabbioni has similarly shown that in 1915, Western Australian Chief Protector of Aborigines, Auber Neville, established institutions to train young Aboriginal women as domestics to supply a growing demand in Perth. Between 1931 and 1940 in Western Australia there were approximately 523 Aboriginal women engaged in domestic service.¹⁴ From the personal accounts of Aboriginal women retold by Sabbioni it would appear that

¹⁰Annual Report for the Northern Territory, 1912, p.1, CPP.

¹¹*Northern Territory Times*, 13 September 1917.

¹²Using Benedict Anderson's notion of an 'imagined community' in *Imagined Community: Reflections on the origins and spread of nationalism*, Verso, London, 1983.

¹³Inara Walden, ' "That was slavery days": Aboriginal Domestic Servants in New South Wales in the Twentieth Century', in *Aboriginal Workers*, Special Issue of *Labour History*, no. 69, November 1995, p.196.

¹⁴Jennifer Sabbioni, ' "I Hate Working for White People" ', *Hecate*, Vol. XIX, no. ii, 1993, p. 10.

experiences in Perth were similar in many ways to those in the Northern Territory. This widespread employment of Aboriginal workers in southern regions calls into question the rhetoric of climatic determinism, which prevailed in discussions of Darwin.

The notion that Australia's tropics were suited to 'coloured' labour became more popular during the 1920s. According to Yale University geographer, Ellsworth Huntington, writing in 1923 for the Pan-Pacific Science Congress, north Australia was rated as close to Java in its suitability for 'generating and maintaining Anglo-Saxon civilisation'.¹⁵ The hot, humid, climate was regarded as one of the prime obstacles to white colonisation of the region. Government reports in the 1920s resurrected early arguments, such as Kidd and Ripley's 1898 report that argued that 'a permanent, servile, native population' was 'indispensable to the white colonization of the tropics'. H. Gregory, M. P. lobbied the Minister for Home and Territories in 1920 on the necessity of making provision for servants in the tropical regions of Australia. He argued that even the most ardent exponents of the White Australia policy should

realise the difficulties, hardships and disadvantages of those who are compelled to reside in the humid areas of Australia. ... If you wish to populate the Northern part of Australia, coloured labour for the household is absolutely essential.¹⁶

He specifically mentioned the need for more Chinese and Japanese servants, ignoring the employment of Aboriginal servants.

J. W. Bleakley, Chief Protector of Aboriginals in Queensland wrote an influential report on Aboriginal policy in the Territory in 1928.¹⁷ He represented the use of Aboriginal domestic servants as a necessary evil as 'owing to climatic and other conditions, life in Darwin for many of the white families would be almost impossible without some cheap domestic labour'.¹⁸ Amongst the plethora of climatic justifications, the voice of Labor continued to argue that modern science could overcome the problems of the tropics. But Labor opinion did not represent the majority. This period, apart

¹⁵David Walker, 'Climate, Civilization and Character in Australia, 1880-1940' in *Intellect and Emotion, Essays in Honour of Michael Roe, Australian Cultural History*, no. 16, 1997/8, p. 86.

¹⁶H. Gregory M.P., 23 March 1920, A1/15 20/6227, AA ACT.

¹⁷Rowley discusses Bleakley's 'expert advice' comparing the Northern Territory policy with that of Queensland and Western Australia. C. D. Rowley, *The Destruction of Aboriginal Society*, ANU Press, Canberra, 1970, pp. 255-273.

¹⁸J. W. Bleakley, 'The Aboriginals and Half-Castes of Central Australia and North Australia', *CPP*, Volume 11, 1929, pp. 1159-1225.

from a brief Labor ministry in 1929, was dominated by non-Labor governments and by non-Labor academics. The power of White Australian discourse as it related to labour policy was significantly diminished.

By the late 1930s, the acceptance of anti-White Australia sentiment was demonstrated in the federal government's Payne and Fletcher report of 1937. They rejected the White Australian experiment with white labour, stating:

Most of the women at Darwin do their own housework. The result is that they have all the disadvantages of living in the tropics without any of the usual compensations which tropical countries provide, such as hours of leisure, social intercourse and labour for household duties. The introduction of a strictly limited number of eastern natives under indenture for domestic duties would, paradoxical as it may seem, help to strengthen the White Australia policy by guarding the health of females on whom the success of that policy depends.¹⁹

Payne and Fletcher were direct in their advocacy of 'coloured' servants, proposing a partial return to pre-Federation policy and a loosening of immigration restriction.

Charles Rowley described the contents of this report as 'ponderous nonsense', pointing out that Payne and Fletcher did not acknowledge the role of Aboriginal workers in the Territory.²⁰ They were apparently unaware of the predominance of Aboriginal servants, having recommended that the 'aboriginals who are maintained at the expense of the community in the Aboriginal Compound should give 'some value in return' and could be put to work beautifying the town, planting trees and shrubs.²¹ This misrepresentation was no doubt intended to strengthen their call for the resumption of imported indentured labour.

Payne and Fletcher clearly regarded the tropical conditions of the north as sufficient to warrant a break from the national policy of White Australia and a return to a British colonial model. They concluded:

The White Australia policy is a great ideal but it places on the Government in the peopling of the tropics, the obligation of seeing that those citizens who are helping to uphold the policy are given

¹⁹Payne and Fletcher, 'Report of the Board of Inquiry into Land and Land Industries of the Northern Territory of Australia', 10 October 1937, *CPP*, 1937-40, Volume III, p. 72.

²⁰Rowley, C, *The Destruction of Aboriginal Society*, p. 283.

²¹Payne and Fletcher Report, p. 73.

the opportunity of enjoying ordinary comforts of life and those social amenities so essential for the alleviation of tropical conditions, and which, in fact, are enjoyed by white people in all tropical countries of the world except North Australia.²²

By focusing on the defence argument, and White Australia's fear of the 'empty spaces' to the north, Payne and Fletcher were able to present their proposals to colonise and develop the northern region as being in keeping with White Australia. They were in fact advocating a form of 'mixed' colonisation, rather than 'pure' settlement. Only the latter, however, would have satisfied the terms of White Australia as it was described in 1901. As an officially endorsed government report, this document redefined the meaning of White Australia. Their reference to other tropical colonies only confirms this interpretation. Their report calls into question D. K. Fieldhouse's argument that Australia had nothing in common with other tropical colonies.²³

Legislating for Aboriginal servants

When the federal Labor government took over the Territory in 1911 steps were taken to regulate the employment of Aboriginal workers. According to Alan Powell, this brought 'a rigid regulation' to the lives of the Aboriginal population.²⁴ The *Northern Territory Aboriginals Act* 1910, amended in the *Aboriginals Ordinance* 1911, outlined a system in which the Chief Protector of Aboriginals would have control over employment by means of a licence sold to employers.²⁵ The federal government appointed anthropologist, Baldwin Spencer, as Chief Protector of Aboriginals in 1912.²⁶ Spencer approved of the employment of Aboriginal people as servants. As a so-called 'expert' on the subject, his reports were not questioned. He believed that the Aboriginal population of Darwin had

²²Payne and Fletcher Report, p. 72.

²³D. K. Fieldhouse, *The Colonial Empires, A Comparative Survey from the Eighteenth Century*, Macmillan Educational Ltd., London, 1966, pp. 250-251.

²⁴Alan Powell, *Far Country, A Short History of the Northern Territory*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, 1982, p. 161.

²⁵*Aboriginals Ordinance* 1911, No. 16 of 1911, *Commonwealth of Australia Gazette* No. 2, Melbourne, 8 January 1912.

²⁶For a more detailed account of Spencer's activities in Darwin see D. J. Mulvaney and J. H. Calaby, 'So much that is new', *Baldwin Spencer, 1860-1929*, Melbourne University Press, 1985, pp. 278-284; Baldwin Spencer, *Wanderings in Wild Australia*, London, 1928, Volume II, pp. 602-610.

long since become degenerate and have lost all their old customs and beliefs. ... Many of them are employed by white residents to whom they are useful and by whom they are well treated.²⁷

The ease with which Spencer accepted this situation is indicative of the pervasive culture of white paternalism in Australia. There was no indication in his reports that cheap Aboriginal labour was unacceptable to White Australia.

Nor did Spencer question the assumption that domestic service was their natural domain of employment, despite the fact that such stereotyping was the direct product of colonial traditions. As Etienne Balibar has noted, historically, slave owners represented their slave populations as inferior 'races', 'ever predestined for servitude and incapable of producing an autonomous civilization.'²⁸ So it was with the white administrators of Darwin.

In 1911, there were 125 Aboriginal workers employed in Darwin, according to the report of J. T. Beckett, Inspector of Aboriginals. He described the Aboriginal population as

a docile submissive people, who, in spite the many aspersions cast upon them by detractors in other States render excellent service in return for the pittance doled out to them.²⁹

According to the 1911 census figures for Darwin, there were 145 male and 102 female 'full blooded Aboriginal' and a further 30 male and 28 female 'half-caste Aboriginals'. These were the categories employed by the administration during this period. These 'racial' categories denoted a strict hierarchy of social status in the eyes of the general white population. In 1911, there were only 374 Europeans and 442 Chinese in Darwin.³⁰ Individuals from both these groups employed Aboriginal servants.

²⁷Baldwin Spencer to Atlee Hunt, 15 April, 1912, Atlee Hunt Papers, MS 52/1042, NLA; Spencer in Annual Report of the Northern Territory, 1912, *CPP*, p.42.

²⁸Etienne Balibar, 'Class Racism', in E. Balibar and I. Wallerstein, *Race, Nation, Class, Ambiguous Identities*, Verso, London, 1988, p. 207.

²⁹J. T. Beckett to Dr. H. Basedow, Chief Protector and Chief Medical Inspector. 29 July 1911, A1/15 1912/ 10964, AA ACT.

³⁰Census Figures for Darwin, A1/15 11/16191, AA ACT.

Chinese employers

In 1911, when the Commonwealth took on the task of recruiting and placing Aboriginal servants, they were ostensibly concerned to 'protect' the workers from those whom they deemed to be inappropriate employers. It was suggested that the employment of Aboriginal women in white households allowed them to receive 'valuable domestic training from their mistresses'. In contrast, their employment by 'Asiatics' was described as being detrimental, the association having 'debased and rendered them vicious, cunning and untrustworthy'. It was believed that women were 'ruined physically and morally' in Chinese employment.³¹ The outgoing Administrator, S. J. Mitchell, claimed that 'Asiatic' employers were supplying their Aboriginal workers with opium and alcohol by way of payment.³²

These arguments, with all their exaggerated 'racial' stereotyping, found their way into the legislation. Baldwin Spencer was a fierce opponent of the Chinese in Darwin, declaring: 'There are a few decent ones but 98% are low depraved beasts who want deporting.'³³ He proclaimed the area of Chinatown, in central Darwin, as a prohibited area for Aboriginal people. He planned to issue 'special permits in the form of brass discs' that were given to employers and enabled Aboriginal servants to enter a prohibited area when sent on business by their employer.³⁴ This restriction on the movement of the Aboriginal population resembled the Natal legislation so abhorred by the Labor senators in the 1901 debate.³⁵ In fact the regulations were not so much directed against the Aboriginal workers themselves — though they bore the consequences — so much as against the Chinese. Any measures which lessened the supposed corrupting influence of the Chinese were regarded as beneficial to White Australia.

The decision to prevent all 'Asiatics' from employing Aboriginal servants was queried by Mitchell who believed that some treated their employees as well as Europeans.³⁶ In 1911 seven Chinese storekeepers and trades people protested to Mitchell:

³¹J. H. Kelly and J. T. Beckett, report to the Chief Protector of Aborigines, 11 August, 1911, A1/15 1912/10964, AA ACT.

³²S. Mitchell to the Minister for External Affairs, 1911, p. 4, A1/15 1912/2937, AA ACT.

³³Alan Powell, *Far Country*, p. 161.

³⁴Compare this with the description in chapter two of Indian servants in Natal in 1900. Annual report for the Northern Territory, *CPP*, 1911, p. 5, 1912, p. 42.

³⁵See chapter three.

³⁶Acting Administrator, S. Mitchell to External Affairs, 7 September 1911, A 1/1 1912.2937, AA ACT.

Many of us have had the blackboys in our employ for years and have always treated them well and the boys do not want to leave us. This will work a great hardship on us.

These Chinese had been resident in Darwin for an average of 30 years, that is since 1880.³⁷ Again in 1912, the Chinese petitioned Baldwin Spencer. Their solicitor argued that they were 'as fit as the average European to employ natives'.³⁸ The local white business community of Darwin supported the Chinese, sending a petition to Josiah Thomas, the Minister for External Affairs, asking for Section 24 of the *Aboriginals Act* to be revised. The petition was signed by every important business person in Darwin — a total of twenty-seven, including bank managers and shipping agents.³⁹ This alliance of business interests represented the voice of the anti-White Australia lobby, as discussed in chapter five.

But the federal Labor government declined to reconsider the prohibition.⁴⁰ When questioned personally by the Chinese residents, the Minister for External Affairs replied that: 'If the wishes of the deputation could be met without violating the "White Australia" policy, the Government would do so', adding that the 'present Chinese residents of the Territory must receive fair treatment'.⁴¹ His comments provide yet another definition of White Australia. Apparently cheap Aboriginal labour was acceptable when the employer was white but not when the employer was 'Asiatic'. The logic behind this distinction was that white employers were inherently benevolent and a moral influence on their employees. This notion sits rather uneasily alongside Labor's allegations regarding the poor treatment of 'Kanakas' in Queensland by white employers.⁴²

A State enterprise

During the next three decades, this system of employing Aboriginal servants remained in place, the only change being the degree of control exercised over

³⁷Chinese storekeepers to Justice Mitchell, Government Resident, 22 March 1911, A1/15 1912/10547, AA ACT.

³⁸J. Symes, Solicitor, to Baldwin Spencer, 14 February 1912, A1/15 1912/6611, AA ACT.

³⁹Petition from residents to Josiah Thomas, Minister for External Affairs, A1/15 1912/6611, AA ACT.

⁴⁰Atlee Hunt to Administrator of Northern Territory, 30 May 1912, A1/15 1912/6611, AA ACT.

⁴¹Notes of Deputation from Chinese Residents of Darwin which waited upon the Minister for External Affairs, 6 May 1912, A1/15 1912/10547, AA ACT.

⁴²Chinese were ultimately permitted to employ Aboriginal labour with the permission of the Chief Protector, though they were not permitted to employ Aboriginal women. In 1930, however, it was still considered desirable to prohibit all employment of Aboriginal labour by Chinese. See Minutes of Conference on Aboriginals, A1/15 1933/479, AA ACT.

Aboriginal workers. According to Tony Austin, legislation was primarily 'to protect employers in a town starved of cheap, reliable domestic help, by preventing workers from quitting at short notice'.⁴³ Restrictive regulations meant that the Aboriginal population was increasingly segregated from the rest of the community and the freedom of movement allowed them under the South Australian government was gradually eroded.

One might have assumed that the number of Aboriginal servants would have decreased under the White Australia policy, but in fact it increased. The Secretary for the Department of the Exterior, Atlee Hunt, worried that by encouraging Aboriginal employment they were 'encouraging a state of things that is one of the objects of the white Australia policy to prevent'. But whatever hesitation he felt was never translated into policy.⁴⁴ By 1928 there were 200 Aboriginal workers in employment in Darwin and by 1936 a total of 348 identity discs had been issued to those employed in the Darwin town centre.⁴⁵

The increase in Aboriginal employment was intended to keep pace with the expanding white population. In the 1917 Annual report, the Administrator, Gilruth argued that:

The great increase in the white population of Darwin has resulted in the demand for aboriginal assistance in households exceeding the supply, though the officers of the Department have done everything possible to assist housewives anxious to obtain this, the only class of domestic assistance available.⁴⁶

The local Aboriginal population was too small to supply this demand and so, as more and more Aboriginal peoples migrated to Darwin from Melville Island, Daly River and other regions they were encouraged to take up domestic service.

By the late 1930s, the servant industry in Darwin was booming. At the 1937 conference in Canberra to discuss Aboriginal policy, C. L. A. Abbott, the new Administrator, and previous Minister for the Interior, gave his approval to those Aboriginal people who migrated to Darwin, provided that they 'find work as houseboys and are good workers'. Abbott reported that

⁴³Tony Austin, *I Can Picture the Old Home So Clearly, The Commonwealth and 'Half-caste' Youth in the Northern Territory, 1911-1939*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, 1993. p. 67.

⁴⁴Hunt cited in *Ibid.*, p. 54.

⁴⁵Report of the Chief Protector, in Report on the Administration of the Northern Territory for year ended 30 June, 1936.

⁴⁶Gilruth in Northern Territory of Australia, Annual Report for the year 1916-1917.

the demand for domestic labour could not be met by 'half-caste' institutions, despite the fact that there were a total of 279 'inmates in Government institutions'.⁴⁷ Aboriginal domestic service had become a thriving industry in the eyes of the government. They sold licences to employ Aboriginal labour, used free Aboriginal labour at will, insisted that employers contribute to food, medical care and housing, and kept approximately half of Aboriginal earnings in 'trust' for indefinite periods. In effect, it was likely that the Aboriginal Department was entirely funded through Aboriginal labour. Ironically, the coming of White Australia had merely transformed one instance of cheap 'coloured' labour into a state-controlled industry and that control served only to increase the forced character of their employment.

Labor against slavery?

According to the Labor Party, the supposed moral justification for the *Immigration Restriction Act* was that it prevented the exploitation and social inequalities inherent in the British colonial system. White Australia supposedly rested on a national ideal of egalitarianism.⁴⁸ By removing 'coloured' labour they thought to remove the injustice of the indenture system. The concept of a 'racially' stratified workforce was contrary not only to Labor's notions of unionism, but also to their desire for a democratic nation based on the principal of equal citizenship. Given this, one might have expected that Labor would have eschewed any systematic exploitation of unfree Aboriginal labour or at least taken steps to improve their working conditions.

Eugene Genovese uses the term 'paternalism' to describe the relationship between the colonists and their slaves, arguing that this concept was forged in 'the seigneurial world of medieval Europe' with the relationship between lord and serf.⁴⁹ He argues that the class struggles of Europe were replayed in the colonies, seemingly unaffected by the advances made by the European workers. The loudest critics of American slavery were the Labor Senators who advocated a White Australia in order to prevent this very evil. Senator Thomas Glassey of Queensland, for example, spoke in

⁴⁷C. L. A. Abbott, Report on the Administration of the Northern Territory for the year ended 1937.

⁴⁸This notion is apparently internationally accepted if one considers the statement by Eric Hobsbawm that in the 1920s: 'In the three continents of Asia, Africa and Australasia only Australia and New Zealand were consistently democratic, for the majority of South Africans remained strictly outside the ambit of the white men's constitution.' *Age of Extremes, The Short Twentieth Century 1914-1991*, Abacus, London, 1994, p. 111.

⁴⁹E. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made*, Pantheon Books, New York, 1974, p. 5.

Admiring their own photos, Darwin.
(E. D. Donnison, Darwin, 1914-1920, MSS/890/3, no. 72, Mitchell Library,
State Library of NSW)

Please see print copy for image



parliament in 1901 of the 'iniquitous and villainous system called slavery' and argued that only the White Australia policy would prevent such a system taking hold in Australia.⁵⁰ The treatment of Aboriginal workers, however, was analogous to slavery in many aspects. How was it then that the Labor government and local unionists did nothing to prevent their continued exploitation?

Racial stereotyping

One of the main justifications for the discriminatory employment structure under White Australia was the assumption that Aboriginal workers were inherently unable to perform work at white standards. This belief was based on the prevalence of Social Darwinist thought in this period and the notion that different 'races' were supposedly inherently inferior in intellect to the superior 'white race'. Well-known anthropologist at the time, Professor Elkin at the University of Sydney had expressed his opinion on the Aboriginal 'child race' who were doomed to extinction, being unable to 'jump the centuries' to attain civilisation'.⁵¹

The Inspector of Schools, reporting on the Aboriginal children at the Kahlin Compound school stated:

The children appear to be very bright and active ... Their powers of concentration, however, are not great. ... I believe that many excellent servants will be supplied to the residents of Darwin from time to time from this newly established school.⁵²

Underlying this report was the notion that the Aboriginal children were 'racially' incapable of reaching any higher level of education than that required of a servant.

Not everyone shared the same interpretations of Social Darwinism and 'racial' hierarchy. Gilruth, in 1918, questioned anthropologists who placed Aboriginal Australians on the lowest rung of 'racial' hierarchy.⁵³ His assessment, however, differed only in degree as he argued:

⁵⁰Senator Glassey, Senate debate on the Immigration Restriction Bill, p. 7276, *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates (CPD)*, Volume 6, 1901.

⁵¹Elkin cited in Andrew Markus, *Governing Savages*, Allen & Unwin, St Leonards, 1990, p. 146. For more detail on Elkin's work see Russell McGregor, *Imagined Destinies, Aboriginal Australians and the Doomed Race Theory, 1880-1939*, Melbourne University Press, 1997, Chapter five.

⁵²Austin, *I Can Picture*, p. 56.

⁵³Note Mark Francis has criticised the generalised use of the term Social Darwinism in Australian history, arguing that many other theories were used. See ' "Social Darwinism" and the Construction of Institutionalised Racism in Australia', *Journal of Australian Studies*, nos. 50/51, 1996, pp. 90-105.

That the aboriginal is not the degraded human being, and of the low order of intelligence that is so commonly asserted, I am more and more convinced. ... Yet the blackfellow who is not demoralized by the European, who comprehends what his employer wishes, and is treated firmly yet sympathetically, displays an intelligence and a loyalty of no mean order.⁵⁴

The need to be treated firmly suggests that Gilruth attributed some childlike quality to Aboriginal intelligence. Chief Protector Cecil Cook's view was marginally more favourable, placing Aboriginal workers in the same category as Asian workers. He wrote: 'There appears to be no reason why the aboriginal should not be trained to be as efficient, clean and intelligent an attendant as a Chinese or Malay'.⁵⁵ Like Gilruth his tone suggests an unassailable belief in the inherent inferiority of the Aboriginal people. By categorising them alongside Chinese and Malay servants, however, he was defying contemporary notions of 'racial' hierarchy.

Administrator Abbott adhered to a more rigid notion of racial hierarchy, writing in 1945 that:

In dealing with the native it should never be forgotten that he is a childlike person. Small things amuse him and he has a particularly keen sense of the ridiculous. ... The aboriginal is a very different proposition to the New Guinea native and is far below the standard of the Maoris and the Fijians. There have been Australian natives who have fully responded to teaching, but these have been few.⁵⁶

Regardless of precisely how the administrators categorised Aboriginal workers, they all reiterated the belief that Aboriginal servants were childlike and required constant supervision.⁵⁷

Elsie Masson, companion in administrator Gilruth's household, described her impression of Aboriginal servants during 1914.⁵⁸

⁵⁴Gilruth, Northern Territory of Australia, Annual Report for the year 1917-18.

⁵⁵Cecil Cook, Chief Protector of Aborigines, Report, 8 July 1936, A1/15 37/70, AA ACT.

⁵⁶C. L. A. Abbott, *Australia's Frontier Province*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1950. p. 147.

⁵⁷See also, Ann McGrath, *Born in the Cattle*, *Aborigines in Cattle Country*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1987, p. 99.

⁵⁸Elsie Masson was a friend of Baldwin Spencer. In 1919 she married anthropologist, Dr. Bronislaw Malinowski. Mickey Dewar, 'Masson (Malinowski), Elsie Rosaline (1891-1935)' in David Carment and Helen Wilson (eds.), *Northern Territory Dictionary of Biography, Volume Three*, Northern Territory University Press, Darwin, 1996, p. 219. Note that Elsie Masson had been a friend of Baldwin Spencer.

... George is not a native of Darwin, but he and some of his countrymen have paddled in a canoe all the way from their home on the Daly River to see a little town life in Darwin. He is a slender youth of about sixteen, with straight, black hair, a very narrow head, gloomy eyes, and an air of easy nonchalance very exasperating to the Missis. He is dressed in dirty khaki trousers, a blue shirt, and a bead collar of his own making.⁵⁹

Masson also characterised Aboriginal servants as childlike, referring to them as: 'Simple, merry folk, docile but never cringing, frequently exasperating but endlessly amusing, they know a sure way to gain affection, the way of a responsive, artless child.'⁶⁰ Similarly, Mrs. Gilruth wrote:

The lubra can be made a good domestic and is perfectly willing to learn, and tractable, but black women are not self-reliant. They could not be left in charge of the house or of children, but if anyone is over them they are alright.⁶¹

Their descriptions fit Van den Berghe's pattern of paternalism, whereby the 'kindly master' views the 'native' workers as

immature, exuberant, impulsive, uninhibited, lazy, fun-loving, good-humored, happy-go-lucky. In short, they are inferior but lovable. They ought to be treated sternly and kindly at the same time. Corporal punishment is to be used as one uses it to keep one's own children in line.⁶²

This attitude did not change over the period in question. Writing in 1927, Mrs Finniss claimed that she had to work hard to supervise her Aboriginal servants, commenting:

⁵⁹Elsie Masson, *An Untamed Territory*, Macmillan and Co., London, 1915, pp. 44, 47.

⁶⁰*Ibid.*, p. 50.

⁶¹*Northern Territory Times* 30 July 1914. See also Ann McGrath, ' "Spinifex Fairies": Aboriginal Workers in the Northern Territory, 1911-1939', in Elizabeth Windschuttle (ed.), *Women, Class and History: Feminist Perspectives on Australia, 1788-1978*, Fontana/Collins, Melbourne, 1980, pp. 237-267; Lyn Riddett, 'Watch the White Women Fade': Aboriginal and White Women in the Northern Territory, 1870-1940', *Hecate*, Volume XIX, no. i, 1992, pp. 73-92.

⁶²P. Van den Berghe, *Race and Ethnicity: Essays in Comparative Sociology*, New York: Basic Books, 1970, p. 24. Henry Reynolds also discusses the link between Social Darwinism and the belief that Aborigines were a 'child-like race'. See Henry Reynolds, *Frontier: Aborigines, Settlers and Land*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1987, pp. 118-119.

We don't employ the aborigines as cooks, but, with careful training, they make good house-servants. They are liable to do strange things if left to follow the dictates of their own judgment. Your laundress, for instance, will probably boil you husband's coloured socks with your finest white lingerie. Once, just after engaging a native boy for the kitchen, I was alarmed to discover the whole house was filled with dense smoke. I thought we were to be burnt out, but when I penetrated to the kitchen I found that the boy had only lit a fire in the oven.⁶³

Even more 'progressive' employers, such as Hazel Mackey, whose husband was head of the Bureau of Meteorology, combined praise with a certain quality of condescension. She recalled that their Aboriginal servant, Willie Dyall, 'learnt very quickly, and he was very cheerful, very helpful, and a very interesting man to talk to'.⁶⁴ She also described how clever he was that he worked out how to fix the car engine merely by observing previous operations. Even this affirmation of Aboriginal intelligence was phrased in a way which suggested some innate 'racial' ability. She stated: 'Now he had a picture of that in his mind, like they picture things on the ground — they're terribly observant ...'.⁶⁵ Her pride in his achievements took on the tone of an adult speaking of a child.

Wages and working conditions

This endemic belief in the 'racial' inferiority of Aboriginal workers was one of the key reasons for their continued low wages. Even the Labor government could argue that equal wages could only be applied to equal work, and that Aboriginal work was never equal to that of white workers. Even putting aside the issue of wages, however, the working conditions of Aboriginal servants were undoubtedly of humanitarian concern.

One of the rare government officials who considered the exploitation of Aboriginal servants was J. T. Beckett, working for the Aboriginal Department, who reported to the federal government in 1911 on the conditions he found in Darwin. He indicated that Aboriginal workers were given two shilling per week and food and clothes for their labour. He

⁶³'Lure of the South', *Northern Standard*, 4 February 1927.

⁶⁴Hazel Mackey, Transcript of interview by Ciena Fitzgerald, TS 625, 1990, Tape 1, p.10, Tape 2, p. 5, NTRS 226, Northern Territory Archive Service (NTAS).

⁶⁵*Ibid.*, Tape 2, p. 7.

described this wage as a 'pittance'.⁶⁶ By way of comparison, union waterside workers at the time were demanding two shillings per hour. Beckett's protests went unheard, and no attempt was made to increase Aboriginal wages under the Fisher Labor government.

In 1929 the Scullin Labor government was elected and Arthur Blakeley was appointed Minister for Home Affairs. As the only Labor Minister for this period, Blakeley brought a different perspective to bear on the question of Aboriginal employment, influenced no doubt by his previous experience as president of the AWU from 1919 to 1923.⁶⁷ Blakeley claimed to be concerned over the conditions of Aboriginal employment in the Territory. He stated:

When I assumed office I was not satisfied that the aboriginals and half-castes were receiving proper and adequate treatment in regard to wages and conditions. It would appear that there was a form of slavery in operation and that aboriginals were being worked without any remuneration whatever.⁶⁸

Blakeley organised a conference in 1930, inviting representatives of the pastoralists, missionaries, and the NAWU. Little was achieved, other than to confirm the status quo.

The union representatives were Secretary, Robert Toupein and Organiser, Owen Rowe. Both were staunch White Australians. They called for Aboriginal workers to receive the minimum award wage, but they made it clear that their primary concern was to protect white labour from cheap competition. Their preferred solution was to have the Aboriginal population segregated so as to remove them entirely from the labour market. Neither motion was passed by the opposing missionaries and pastoralists.⁶⁹ The double standards of the NAWU were noted by Beryl Cashman, speaking of her family's business, the Club Hotel. She recalled that the hotel employed a number of 'native boys', in particular for the job

⁶⁶J. T. Beckett to Dr. H. Basedow, Chief Protector and Chief Medical Inspector, 29 July 1911, A1/15 1912/ 10964, AA ACT.

⁶⁷Markus, *Governing Savages*, p.130; N. Marshall, 'Blakeley, Arthur', in Nairn and Serle(eds.) *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Vol. 7: 1891-1939, Melbourne: Melbourne University. Press, 1979. See chapter three, this thesis, for an analysis of union views.

⁶⁸13 June 1930, N21/48 ACTU, W.A. and Darwin, 1929-1940, NBAC,ANU; see also Toupein, Secretary of the NAWU complaint to the ACTU regarding Blakeley cancelling the £2-0-0 weekly wage for Aboriginal drovers. 3 June 1930. Blakeley passed the Half Caste Apprentices Regulations in November 1930, A1/15 33/479 AA ACT; see also Markus, *Governing Savages*, p. 134.

⁶⁹'Notes on Conference regarding the payment of Half-castes and Aboriginals in Country Districts', Darwin, 1 May 1930, A1/15 1938/329, AA ACT.

of 'punkah boy'. This job entailed working the large overhead fans which provided cooling in the days before air-conditioning.⁷⁰ Their 'native boys', she explained, did 'all the dirty work' and 'even washing, ironing and everything else'. Despite this, the hotel employed a number of white housemaids whose wages and conditions were set according to union regulations.⁷¹ Provided the Hotel looked after their white workers, the union was satisfied.

Writing a report for the ACTU in 1932, Rowe described the working conditions of Aboriginal servants in Darwin, taking into account food, clothing, hours and wages. At this time Aboriginal workers were being paid a set wage of three shillings per week with a further two shillings being paid into a trust account. In practice the money in trust accounts was all but inaccessible to the workers. Their wages of 3 shillings gave them little more than pocket money, with entry into the cinema being one shilling. A representative of the Larrakeyah Aboriginal community protested to the *Northern Standard* in 1936 asking: 'How can we buy clothes for ourselves and keep our families on 3/-?'⁷² There was no concept of the male Aboriginal worker as bread winner under this paternalistic system, where all Aboriginal people were denied adult rights and responsibilities.

This issue of gender roles amongst Aboriginal servants is rarely considered in the literature; Aboriginal domestic servants are usually depicted as being female.⁷³ According to Inara Walden, in NSW there was no demand for male domestic labour.⁷⁴ In Darwin, by comparison, Aboriginal men made up more than 50% of servants throughout this period.⁷⁵ Their jobs usually involved outdoor work such as gardening, wood-chopping, shopping, sweeping, and hanging out the clothes.

The white elite of Darwin, known disparagingly as 'silvertails', were unable to take the concerns of Aboriginal workers seriously as it indicated in this description:

If during the week you have given your black boy your discarded sun helmet, or an old pair of shoes, trousers, singlets or some other garment, irrespective of whether they are several sizes too large for

⁷⁰Beryl Cashman, Transcript of interview by Georgina Story, 1984, TS 25, NTRS 226, NTAS.

⁷¹Cashman Interview, p. 11.

⁷²'The Larrakeyah Tribe, Deputation to Visit Col. Weddell', *Northern Standard*, 24 March 1936.

⁷³Jackie Huggins, 'White Aprons, Black Hands: Aboriginal Women Domestic Servants in Queensland', in *Aboriginal Workers*, special issue of *Labour History*, no. 69, November, 1995, p. 194.

⁷⁴Walden, ' "That was slavery days" ', p. 196.

⁷⁵Estimated from a list of 87 employees, 'Statement of Amounts due to date of four-weekly payment', 30 June 1938, F1 1938/17, National Archives of Australia, Northern Territory (AA NT).

him, it is a foregone conclusion that he will appear in them at the picture show and 'swank' over other boys who have not been quite so generously treated by their employers. And the European ladies sometimes get much amusement in recognizing on some lubra a frock that once adorned the figure of Mrs. A. or Mrs. B. when she attended an afternoon or evening function at the Residency or Mrs. C.'s bungalow.⁷⁶

This account, with its typical usage of the term 'boy', captures the bizarre attitude of 'silvertail' society which found amusement in Aboriginal dependency. They represented their own actions in terms of 'generosity', failing to acknowledge the reality of exploitation.

Low wages were only a small part of the problem. According to Rowe the food supplied to Aboriginal servants, was 'rejected food from the employers table, scraps that would otherwise go to the fowls, or domestic animals'. Similarly clothing was usually of the poorest material, unless it happened to be the caste-off clothes of the employer. Even so, Rowe, who had travelled throughout most of the Territory in his capacity as union organiser, concluded that: 'Generally speaking, the blacks around the towns are well fed, clothed, and treated as compared with their brethren in the bush.'⁷⁷

Rowe's assessment of Aboriginal conditions is confirmed by oral histories. For example, Con Scott, who was born in Darwin in 1921, recalled that their Aboriginal 'help', Tommy, did the clothes washing and other household tasks, though he was never allowed inside the house.⁷⁸ Describing Tommy's food, Scott stated:

He used to have scraps, ... what was left over. But plenty of bread. No butter, not unless us kids got to him and give him — felt sorry for him, and give him butter and jam. If we'd been caught, we would've been murdered by Mum, because it was the Depression.

He was also given black tea. Scott recalls, 'there was no milk or sugar for him, unless us kids give it to him.'⁷⁹ According to Scott, Tommy was given

⁷⁶C. Price Conigrave, *North Australia*, Jonathon Cape, London, 1936, pp. 120-21.

⁷⁷Owen Rowe, Organiser, North Australian Workers' Union, 'Aboriginal Employment and Conditions in the Northern Territory', 16 March 1932. Report sent to C. Crofts, ACTU, ACTU Papers, N21/48, ACTU WA and Darwin, 1929-1940, NBAC, ANU.

⁷⁸Thomas O'Connor (Con) Scott, Transcript of interview by Margaret Kowald, 1990, Tape 1, p. 14, TS616, NTRS, NTAS.

⁷⁹*Ibid.*, p. 15.

his father's hand-me-down trousers which he pulled in at the waist with a piece of rope. While the material conditions of Aboriginal servants were clearly of concern to the union observers, few thought to question this social hierarchy in which even a child could look down with pity upon an adult Aboriginal worker.

While the wages and conditions of Aboriginal servants were raised as issues of concern by the NAWU, on the question of working hours, Rowe was satisfied, describing working hours as not being excessive. This was in contrast to Aboriginal workers living in southern cities, where they could be expected to work for as long as their employer wished. Before the implementation of government control, Aboriginal servants were able to negotiate their hours directly with employers. Elsie Masson's 1914 account, depicted Aboriginal servants in stereotypical terms as the 'lazy native'. If, however, one reads her account against the grain, a picture emerges of Aboriginal work patterns. George was described as taking frequent holidays for family business and corroborees, and when he decided to return home for two months he did so without asking for permission.⁸⁰ Clearly, by his own negotiation, his working hours were not excessive. Such negotiations were not uncommon. Richard Broome has noted that while Aboriginal workers may have been labelled as 'lazy' they saw work-oriented whites as crazy and often did not hesitate to insist on taking leave.⁸¹ The custom of taking a two-month holiday survived into the 1930s. The *Northern Standard* reported in 1936: 'Following the usual custom many of the aboriginal domestics have left Darwin on their annual walkabout. Most of them will be absent for about two moons.'⁸² 'Two moons' was the exact same phrase used by Elsie Masson in 1914.

Aboriginal servants were largely reliant on the good will of their employers. An interview with Hazel Mackey, suggests that some, at least, were quite generous. She had arrived in Darwin in 1937 with her husband who worked for the Meteorology Department. Her husband bought their Aboriginal servant a bike. She recalls that it was very rare for an Aboriginal man to own a bike. According to her, he had asked for a note stating that he owned it. He was afraid that he would be accused of stealing it. Hazel Mackey gave her opinion that everyone treated their 'native' servants very well, but

⁸⁰Masson, *An Untamed Territory*, pp. 44-47. The issue of Aboriginal cultural interaction with the European system of wage-labour is discussed in the debate between Ann McGrath and Tim Rowse. See Tim Rowse, 'Paternalism's Changing Reputation', *Mankind*, August 1988, Volume 18, no. 2, pp. 57-73.

⁸¹Richard Broome, 'Aboriginal Workers on South-Eastern Frontiers', *Australian Historical Studies*, Volume 26, October 1994, no. 103, p. 220.

⁸²'Round About', *Northern Standard*, 12 May 1936.

she appeared, even in 1990, to be unaware of the degree of prejudice inherent in a society which would assume that a bike was stolen simply because the rider was Aboriginal.⁸³

Whatever passed for good treatment of Aboriginal domestics, it was clearly not the treatment which would have been accorded a white domestic. The three Aboriginal workers employed by the army in 1933 to perform cleaning duties were given a 'half-ration of meat, bread and vegetables ... supplemented on occasions by kitchen scraps'. They were issued with a uniform consisting of shorts, singlets, shirts and a hat but the clothes remained the property of the army. Their accommodation was a lean-to at the back of the kitchen. They slept on hessian beds on wooden frames with an army blanket.⁸⁴ By 1940 all the officers personally employed at least one Aboriginal servant. In addition, the army employed twenty-two Aboriginal workers for general cleaning duties in the bathrooms and messes.⁸⁵

In 1938, Jack McEwen, Minister for the Interior, introduced the new Assimilation policy which aimed

to raise the status of the aboriginal ... to such a degree as would justify the conferring of full citizenship rights upon these people by an appropriate authority, each person being considered as an individual. Such person would, of course, be entitled to all the privileges of white workers.

This new era of Aboriginal policy should have signalled a time for change in the employment conditions of Aboriginal servants. But McEwen still envisaged a racially determined wage structure, stating that those who were unable to reach white standards, would be placed in employment

for which payment would be made in accordance with their capacity to give service, but not under conditions which would permit the use of coloured workers to break down the established conditions of labour in Australia.⁸⁶

⁸³Hazel Mackey Interview, Tape 2, p. 7.

⁸⁴Sec. Military Board, Army Headquarters, Melbourne, from Major, Staff Corps, Troops, Darwin. 12 October 1933, MP508/1, 82/710/2, AA VIC.

⁸⁵Colonel Commandant, Robertson, 7th Military District, to Secretary of the Military Board, 25 January 1940, MP508/1, 82/710/2, AA VIC.

⁸⁶*Northern Standard*, 23 August 1938.

Despite the continued use of standard White Australian rhetoric, and the need to protect white workers from cheap competition, there was nothing in the new policy to suggest that the employment of Aboriginal workers in domestic service would be seriously reviewed.

White working-class as employers

The classic colonial image of white employers is that of the elite white master. In Darwin, however, working-class families such as the Scotts were also employers of Aboriginal servants. Even the poorest families expected to have Aboriginal help. Sarah Feeney employed an Aboriginal man, Deacon, to help with the heavy tasks, such as carrying water, which she was not capable of performing. She recalled that the five shillings in wages were all she had to spare.⁸⁷ This was not uncommon in Darwin. The concept of paternalism presented in 'race' relations literature rarely considers the case of very poor families taking on the role of master and mistress. It is unfortunate that we have no oral histories from workers such as Deacon, to know whether they preferred to work for poor, but perhaps kinder employers.

Even members of the NAWU who claimed to oppose Aboriginal labour, employed Aboriginal servants. In 1928, when the NAWU called for a ban on Aboriginal labour, it was proposed that all union members who employed 'blacks' should be made to 'get rid of them'. Their disapproval was clear, but the proposal was never enforced.⁸⁸

The communist newspaper, the *Workers' Weekly*, was highly critical of the hypocritical stance of the NAWU, and commented:

Certain of the leading elements in the North Aust. Workers' Union are themselves exploiters of native labor and it was because of the stand that members of the C.P. took against this, that has caused these two-faced individuals so much uneasiness ... Coms Waldie and Mahoney, not being at that time members of the C.P., but being, nevertheless, true unionists and working-class fighters, protested against the union taking action against the Chinese merchants until the president of the union and other leading members of the union ceased exploiting the aboriginals.⁸⁹

⁸⁷Sarah Feeney, Transcript of interview by Helen Wilson, 1980, p.11, TS 202/2, NTRS 226, NTAS.

⁸⁸NAWU meeting, *Northern Standard*, 13 April 1928.

⁸⁹*Workers' Weekly*, 30 May 1930, p.2.

J. A. McDonald, Secretary of the NAWU in the late 1930s, employed Aboriginal servants, albeit reluctantly. His son, Patrick, recalled in an interview that:

Dad wouldn't allow it, being union secretary, he wouldn't employ, you know cheap labour. Oh, wouldn't even let them in the house. We did have one black boy who used to come, and he'd chop the wood, and he'd hang the washing out for Mum and bring it back. But never allowed in the house, anything like that.⁹⁰

McDonald was apparently more concerned with 'racial' segregation than he was with the continued use of Aboriginal workers as 'cheap' labour. By and large, the union only protested against Aboriginal labour when it threatened white male employment.

McDonald continued to complain to the Minister for the Interior over the employment of Aboriginal workers which he described as 'an ever present evil'.⁹¹ His protests caused Chief Protector Cook to write, somewhat sarcastically, that he failed to see that an Aboriginal worker employed elsewhere was 'in any worse condition than an aboriginal employed in a domestic capacity by a member of the North Australia Workers' Union'.⁹²

McDonald's desire to keep Aboriginal staff out of his house was prompted by his belief that such intimacy was improper. In marked contrast, 'silvertails' used servants to enhance their social prestige. They were far more likely to accept servants as a natural part of a 'mixed' colonial society.⁹³ According to Patrick McDonald the 'silvertails' would 'have them in the house, cooking and waiting on the tables, and doing their ironing, and doing the washing'.⁹⁴ While the unionists employed servants in a rather furtive fashion, the 'silvertails' were comfortable with having servants to do their menial chores.

The social necessity of having servants is cleverly described by Xavier Herbert in his novel *Capricornia*. He describes the phenomenon as the 'Psychological effect of a Solar Topee'. Herbert gathered his inspiration directly from his own experience of Darwin from 1927 to 1930 and the

⁹⁰Patrick McDonald, Transcript of interview by Crieda Fitzgerald, 1990, Tape 2, p. 8, TS 655, NTRS 226, NTAS.

⁹¹McDonald to Paterson, 22 January 1937, 6 January 1936, A1/15 1936/1629, AA ACT.

⁹²Cook to Administrator, 18 February 1936, F1, 1936/112, AA NT.

⁹³See chapter two.

⁹⁴Patrick McDonald Interview, p. 8.

characters closely resemble actual people from that period. In *Capricornia*, the two Shillingsworth brother's arrive in Darwin as clerical staff and immediately attempt to conform to the social requirements of 'silvertail' society:

Oscar took a smelly native from the Compound and converted him into a piece of bright furniture ... and called him the Punkah Wallah. This Wallah fellow also waited at table and did odd jobs; and his lubra worked as housemaid. The services of this pair cost the Shillingsworths five shillings a week in cash and scraps of food, and added inestimably to the value they now set upon themselves.⁹⁵

For special parties, in order to impress their friends, the Shillingsworths hired a temporary Chinese butler.

The number of servants was determined by the wealth of the employer. Jim Fawcett recalled having a 'half-caste' woman, a Chinese cook and an Aboriginal gardener. He described the young woman, Alice, as a member of the family, who 'grew us up'.⁹⁶ This was typical for local middle-class families. Administrator, Abbott had a large staff in Government House, including two 'half-caste' maids, a 'half-caste' gardener and his Aboriginal wife, a young Aboriginal man to sweep the verandah, and Charles See Kee, from Shanghai as his personal secretary. There were also two white employees, a Russian husband and wife, working as chauffeur and cook.⁹⁷

The fact that both working-class and elite families employed Aboriginal servants is important in opening up the discussion on working-class racism. Robert Miles suggested in 1989 that the study of racism had been overwhelmingly concerned with the racism of intellectuals and the elite and called for a history 'from below' approach, which would take into account working-class racism.⁹⁸ The notion of a peculiarly working-class racism, however, has been influenced by sociologists, such as Van den Berghe, who argued that the working-class expressed a 'competitive' racism, based on a fear of industrial competition, whereas the elite tended towards a paternalistic racism.⁹⁹ The relationship between master and servant was

⁹⁵Xavier Herbert, *Capricornia*, Pacific Books, Sydney, 1937, p. 9.

⁹⁶Jim Fawcett, Transcript of interview by Francis Good, 1989, Tape 1, p. 5, TS 613, NTRS 226, NTAS.

⁹⁷Douglas Lockwood, *Australia's Pearl Harbour, Darwin 1942*, Penguin Books, Melbourne, 1992, p. 108.

⁹⁸Robert Miles, *Racism*, Routledge, London, 1989, p.80; J. Sharpe, "History from Below" in P. Burke(ed.), *New Perspectives on Historical Writing*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991, pp. 24-41.

⁹⁹P. Van den Berghe, *Race and Ethnicity: Essays in Comparative Sociology*, New York: Basic Books, 1970, pp. 26-7.

undoubtedly paternalistic and yet how are we to understand the paternalism of the working-class from den Berghe's model?

Conditions for 'half-caste' women

Thus far I have discussed the employment of Aboriginal servants in general terms, but within the 'racial' hierarchy of Darwin society, the term Aboriginal usually referred specifically to so-called 'full-blood' Aboriginals, while 'half-castes' were regarded as a separate case. 'Half-caste' women in Darwin, especially those who lived in the government Half-Caste Home, were also expected to take on domestic work. The 1926 official 'Return of Halfcastes and Quadroons' listed 15 women who were employed as domestics in Darwin. They ranged in age from 13 to 43 and most were of Filipino or Malay descent.¹⁰⁰

The labour laws of Australia in the first half of this century took it for granted that a woman's wage was less than that of her male counterpart. By the logic of biological determinism, an Aboriginal worker was paid less than a white worker. This hierarchical system was made more complex when the law considered 'half-caste' women. 'Half-caste' men in Darwin were entitled to union membership and award wages as will be discussed in chapter seven. It should have followed that 'half-caste' domestics would receive the same wage as white female domestics.¹⁰¹ This was not the case. Under the Aboriginal Ordinance 'half-caste' women were deemed to be Aboriginal and were thus bound by the government wage schedule.

At the 1930 conference to discuss Aboriginal wages, the NAWU suggested that female 'half-castes' should be paid at rates of 17/6 for girls from 16 to 18 years, on the understanding that they would clothe themselves, and 25/- for ages 18 to 21.¹⁰² The 1928 Bleakley schedule had proposed wages of 3/6 with clothes and 7/6 without. Both the unionists and Cecil Cook, Chief Protector of Aboriginals, agreed that this was too low. During the debate it was revealed that Cook's own typist, who was deemed to be 'half-caste', was on a wage of £2/8/9 per week.¹⁰³ It was difficult for Cook to claim that regulations were in the best interest of the 'half-caste' women when those who were working outside the regulations were able to command wages which were the equivalent of white wages.

¹⁰⁰'Return of Halfcastes and Quadroons in the Northern Territory', AA A1/15 1926/5350, AA ACT.

¹⁰¹See Walden's comparison with white wages for domestics which in 1910 ranged from 10 to 20 shillings per week, ' "That was slavery days" ', p. 200.

¹⁰²Darwin Conference, p. 90.

¹⁰³*Ibid.*, p. 91.

Union organiser, Rowe argued that 'half-caste' women were 'quite as efficient as the white girls' and deserved higher wages than they were receiving. He accused Bleakley of believing 'that the halfcaste should be thrown back into the aboriginal camp'.¹⁰⁴ Instead, Rowe suggested providing them with a 'white scale of living', and allowing them to buy their own clothes, giving them the 'right to choose for themselves and exercise their own tastes the same as the white girl would have'. He stated: 'It is not right that because the girl happens to have a bit of colored blood in her she should not be paid for her labour'.¹⁰⁵ Rowe did not take his protest to its logical conclusion, however, and recognise that this same principle should have been applied to all Aboriginal workers. He still believed in the superiority of 'white blood'.

When the new wage structure for 'half-castes' was put to the vote the union were out-voted by the pastoralists and the missionaries. Labor minister Arthur Blakeley, who had determined the composition of the conference, allowed NAWU proposals to be quashed by the anti-labor forces. As a result, 'half-caste' domestic wages were set at six shillings a week and this remained in force until 1938. Of those six shillings, three shillings were paid into the Aboriginal Department's Trust Fund and it was up to the Chief Protector to determine if that money should be paid out to the women.

The conditions under which 'half-caste' women worked were made more difficult by the attitudes of their employers. In 1932, Cook noted that he had had complaints from women who were not receiving their wages. The only money they received was the three shillings paid into the Aboriginal Department Trust Fund.¹⁰⁶ Cook was forced to change the regulations so that all wages were paid directly into the Trust Fund to ensure that there was no discrepancy, a step which only increased Departmental control.¹⁰⁷ In this case, both the employers and employees accused each other of lying, indicating the lack of trust in their working relationship.

According to Ann McGrath, Alice Springs women who were sent to work as domestics in Melbourne and Adelaide complained of their working conditions to Sergeant Stott in 1927. Topsy Fitz wrote demanding her bank book to obtain the money held in trust by the Chief Protector. She wrote:

¹⁰⁴*Ibid.*

¹⁰⁵*Ibid.*, p. 92.

¹⁰⁶Cook to the Administrator, 4 July 1933, A1/15 33/5330, AA ACT.

¹⁰⁷'Regulations under the Aborigines Ordinance 1918-1933', *Commonwealth Gazette*, No. 40, 29 June 1933, Part II - Employment of Aborigines, p. 936.

I am fed up with working for almost nothing ... I don't think that it is a fair thing to keep us girls working hard like this for a paltry 3/- per week when we are old enough to earn more; we have to work such long hours.

She explained that she had not had a single holiday in her eight years' employment.¹⁰⁸

In 1938 the NAWU proposed that all 'half-caste' women who joined the union should be exempt from the provisions of the Aboriginal Ordinance like their male counterparts. Chief Protector Cook was not prepared to relinquish control of the women but proposed that in special circumstances higher wages might be asked for, not exceeding £1 per week. Abbott, the new anti-labour Administrator, supported the project. Speaking on 'efficiency in female half castes' Abbott argued that

there are certainly some who are most efficient as cooks or housemaids and whose conduct is quite good. In my own establishment recently, a half caste female employee cooked an Official Dinner for 28 people and it is obvious that this employee deserves remuneration at a higher rate than that which is laid down in the Ordinance.¹⁰⁹

Even so, a wage of £1 per week was hardly sufficient for such a task and fell well short of Gilruth's payment of £10 per month to his Chinese cook.

Segregation for Aboriginal workers

Although the federal government approved of the continued employment of 'cheap' Aboriginal labour, the tenets of White Australia meant that they were concerned to limit their interaction with white society. This was ironic given the intimate nature of domestic service. This desire for segregation, however, was an intrinsic part of the White Australian ethos. If the 'coloured' population could not be removed entirely, then some form of segregation was deemed necessary. With this in mind, the Kahlin Compound, which was 2.5 kilometres out of town, at the site of the present Cullen Bay Marina, was established. According to Tony Austin, its purpose

¹⁰⁸Ann McGrath, 'Aboriginal women workers in the N.T., 1911-1939', *Hecate*, Volume 4, no. 2, July 1978, p. 13.

¹⁰⁹CLA Abbott to the Department of the Interior, 10 February 1938, F1 1939/408, AA NT.

was to control the movements of the Aboriginal population and to 'do away with camps which offended authorities' sense of aesthetics and hygiene'. Austin explains that the location was far enough from town to isolate the Aborigines and yet close enough for them to walk to work.¹¹⁰

The effect of shifting the Aboriginal population to the Kahlin Compound, had a significant long-term impact on the local Aboriginal people. The main camp site for the local Larrakeyah people had been at Lameroo Beach, in central Darwin. In 1936, years later, representatives of the Larrakeyah, who described themselves as 'salt-water' people, explained that they had been told that the Compound land was given to them. They objected to 'members of other tribes camping and living at the Compound', arguing that as a result of this forced mixing, their children were not learning their language, but a mixture of various languages and English.¹¹¹ In 1912, however, Spencer, as the anthropological 'expert', had already categorised the Larrakeyah as 'detribalized' a term which allowed the government to act with impunity, ignoring any Aboriginal attachment to their land. He reported:

Genuine wild natives would be miserable away from their own country, but in the case of a heterogeneous crowd, such as is now gathered together in Darwin, there was no need to pay any heed to this matter. They have all long since got beyond any traditional feeling.¹¹²

There and gone within a year, Spencer did not stay to see the results of his decisions. The next Chief Protector, W. G. Stretton, complained in 1913 that: 'It has been a difficult matter to induce the different tribes to amalgamate and fraternise'.¹¹³ This forced grouping, was of course, designed to form a labour pool for the government's domestic service agency. In doing so the federal government was deliberately going against the two fundamental tenets of White Australia; that 'cheap coloured' labour should be abandoned, and that the white 'race' should be preserved from the supposed dangers of miscegenation through the creation of all-white communities.

In 1918, with the introduction of a new *Aboriginal Ordinance*, the character of the Kahlin Compound became more restrictive. H. E. Carey, as Chief Protector of Aborigines, reported on the need for employers to

¹¹⁰Austin, *I Can Picture*, p. 45; see also McGregor, *Imagined Destinies*, p. 79.

¹¹¹The Larrakeyah Tribe, Deputation to Visit Col. Weddell', *Northern Standard*, 24 March 1936.

¹¹²Cited in Powell, *Far Country*, p. 163.

¹¹³*Ibid.*

provide suitable accommodation for their Aboriginal employees, but argued that:

Even if such premises exist, the difficulty of keeping the aboriginal from loneliness, especially when working hours are over, and yet of preventing him or her from the contamination of evil companions, still exists. While there is a place like the Kahlin, where the native have much liberty, but can be kept from turning this into license; where the Protector can see they have satisfactory quarters and no unsatisfactory companions (as least of other races than their own) where they can indulge in many tribal customs and social habits, the difficulty for both employer and employee is considerably lessened.¹¹⁴

His benevolent tone is undermined, however, by his insistence that the compound would serve a 'reformatory' purpose, with the Protector having the discretion to insist that Aboriginal residents remain there until being given permission to leave. The Compound, in practice, was not so different from a gaol.

This effort to 'control' the Aboriginal population in Darwin needs to be viewed in the context of what was occurring further inland in 'cattle country'. There the term 'control' was still used as a euphemism for violent beating and murder.¹¹⁵ To some extent, Darwin was sheltered from this frontier warfare and many regarded the treatment of Aboriginal workers in Darwin as being far better than that of the inland. Clearly both must be seen as unacceptable.

Administrator Gilruth reported that 'many natives who formerly had never seen a white man are now becoming gradually acquainted with the best side of the white man's supremacy and discipline'.¹¹⁶ Compound Superintendent, MacDonald confirmed the administrative emphasis on discipline. Commenting on the 235 residents in the Kahlin Compound he wrote:

The discipline is good, the aboriginal is taking more kindly to it than in previous years, but there are a number who will overstep if given

¹¹⁴H. E. Carey, Chief Protector of Aborigines, Annual Report of the Northern Territory, 1917-18, p. 44.

¹¹⁵*Ibid.*, p. 45; See Ann McGrath's discussion of punishment and control of Aborigines on pastoral stations, *Born in the Cattle*, pp. 106-115.

¹¹⁶Gilruth, Northern Territory of Australia, Annual Report for the year 1916-1917.

the opportunity, and it is with strict and impartial discipline only that satisfactory results can be obtained.¹¹⁷

The Kahlin Compound, therefore, served the dual purpose of 'taming' the Aboriginal population while providing a cheap source of domestic servants. If one considers the International Labor Office definition of forced labour, it becomes clear that the greater the control and punishment being meted out in the Compound, the closer such employment came to being forced labour.

In 1928, Bleakley's recommendations were even more restrictive of Aboriginal liberty. He regarded the Kahlin Compound as being too close to town 'where the presence of a large number of aliens ... presented so many of the dangers'. Already, with a view to 'protecting' Aboriginal employees, a night curfew had been imposed, requiring them to return to the Compound one hour after sunset.¹¹⁸ Ironically, each new regulation added to the Aboriginal Ordinance of 1918 took the policy one step closer to the system used in Natal in 1900. That policy, cited in the 1901 Senate debate, decreed that

no Indian may go abroad in the streets of Natal without a badge showing whose servant he is. If found without a badge he is lodged in gaol. ... No Indian may walk the streets after dark, and may only use the middle of the road — side-walks not being for him.¹¹⁹

How was it that White Australians recreated the very system they despised? The curfew went from eight o'clock at night to five o'clock the next morning.¹²⁰

During the 1930s, while Cook was Chief Protector, he gave permission each week for Aboriginal residents to attend the cinema which was within the prohibited area of Darwin. This exemption allowed them to stay out until 'thirty minutes after eleven o'clock'.¹²¹ These regulations are reminiscent of a child's curfew, thus confirming the tendency for paternalism to treat the 'native' as a child. Any such impression is quickly dispelled when one considers that the 1933 Ordinance stated that any Aboriginal person found 'at large' in town one hour after sunset without

¹¹⁷MacDonald, Superintendent of Kahlin Compound, Annual Report, 1917-18, p. 45.

¹¹⁸Bleakley Report, p. 12; Curfew imposed by Protector Robert Macdonald, *Government Gazette, Northern Territory Times*, 14 October 1920.

¹¹⁹Cited by Senator Higgs (Queensland) in *CPD*, Volume 6, p. 7179.

¹²⁰W. L. Fothergill, Acting Chief Protector of Aborigines, Report on the Administration, 1930.

¹²¹*Northern Standard, Government Gazette*, 3 January 1936.

written permission from their employer was guilty of an offence with penalty one month's imprisonment.¹²² Aboriginal prisoners convicted under these regulations became yet another source of labour for the administration, in this instance, free convict labour.

In 1938, under the guidance of Administrator, Abbott, the Kahlin Compound was demolished and the Aboriginal population were moved four miles out of Darwin to Bagot Compound. Abbott argued that the new site would

facilitate effective control of the present aboriginal population who, in the absence of proper facilities for their segregation and housing in a selected locality, are at present residing in insanitary camps situated on beaches and in the bush in and around Darwin.

In a further attempt to segregate the Aboriginal population from the rest of Darwin society, Abbott had all permits which allowed 'aboriginals to sleep on premises' cancelled and those who worked in Darwin were put into trucks at the end of the day and 'compelled to return to the compound to sleep'.¹²³ The fact that the Compound was no longer within easy walking distance made it harder to evade the regulations.

Hilda Abbott, the Administrator's wife, writing her memories of Darwin, commented in a vague and apparently oblivious fashion:

It was amazing that no one had minded the blacks living right among the best bungalows. I think some of the old residents rather liked them there. They enjoyed the touch of the primitive, and the savagery of the didgeridoo in the evening quiet.¹²⁴

Population control

White Australian motives for segregating the Aboriginal population were partly to do with the desire to remove them from the sight and hearing of the white community. As Andrew Markus has argued in *Governing Savages*, more important was their desire to prevent miscegenation, or 'racial' interbreeding. It was feared that the 'half-caste' population would increase at a more rapid rate than the sparse 'white' population, raising the

¹²²Aboriginals Ordinance, Section 30, p. 941.

¹²³Abbott, Report on the Administration of the Northern Territory, 1938.

¹²⁴Hilda Abbott, 'Good-night, All-About', unpublished manuscript, pp. 4-5, Box 3, Folder 3, MS 4744, NLA.

spectre of a 'coloured' north. These concerns were translated into restrictive regulations concerning the employment of Aboriginal women.

During his appointment to Darwin in 1912, anthropologist Baldwin Spencer advised against allowing intercourse between Aboriginal women and men of other 'races'. He would permit marriage only in cases where the two had children and had been living together for some time.¹²⁵ The Administrator Gilruth was similarly concerned to restrict the sexual freedom of Aboriginal women, arguing that 'half-caste' women should remain under the guardianship of the Aboriginal Department indefinitely. Gilruth noted that it was not

uncommon for a white man to take a young half caste woman as his mistress, and after a year or two, abandon her, and so long as the half caste's age is over 18 years, the Department is powerless.¹²⁶

The revisions made to the *Aboriginal Ordinance* of 1918 made it more difficult to employ Aboriginal women. Section 53 declared that any person who:

- (a) habitually consorts with a female aboriginal or half-caste; or
- (b) keeps a female aboriginal or half-caste as his mistress; or
- (c) unlawfully has carnal knowledge of a female aboriginal or half-caste, shall be guilty of an offence.¹²⁷

In order to prevent such 'offences' single men were obliged to employ both 'husband' and 'wife' in order to qualify for a licence. In later years, when 'Asiatics' were again allowed to employ Aboriginal servants they were still banned from employing women.¹²⁸

According to the 1918 Aboriginal Ordinance, women were defined as 'Aboriginal' under the act, unless they were married to men who were 'substantially European' and were living with their husbands.¹²⁹ Thus, a women's only hope of escape was to marry. Should her husband choose to leave her, she might find herself returned to the 'protective' custody of the state. The social lives of 'half-caste' women were put under scrutiny by the

¹²⁵In this document he gave permission for two marriages, one to a man from Chile and another from the Philippines. 'Northern Territory. Marriage with Aborigines', A1/15 1912/3519, AA ACT.

¹²⁶Gilruth cited in Austin, *I Can Picture*, p. 67.

¹²⁷Ordinance No. 9 of 1918, *Government Gazette*, 26 October 1918.

¹²⁸Rowe, 'Aboriginal Employment and Conditions in the Northern Territory'.

¹²⁹Gordon Reid, *A Picnic with the Natives, Aboriginal-European Relations in the Northern Territory to 1910*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, 1990, p.195.

Darwin's 'white' community and their respectability questioned by women who felt that any liaison between 'white' men and 'half-caste' women was inherently immoral. Journalist Jessie Litchfield, paints this unsympathetic portrait of young 'half-caste' women. Describing the Saturday night picture show, Litchfield wrote, that

there were young half-caste girls, seductive of eye, clad in silks and satins, and reeking with scent, all giving the 'Glad eye' and the 'come hither' glance to white men and Malay and Philipino and Chinese alike ...¹³⁰

In 1922 the administration considered restricting their attendance at picture shows in an attempt to prevent white men from escorting 'half-caste' women home. According to McGrath, the report claimed that the numbers of 'half-castes' in the Compound was growing as a result of such liaisons.¹³¹ According to J. T. Beckett, Baldwin Spencer had made attempts in 1912 to repress 'half-caste' harems in Darwin.¹³²

Bleakley's report of 1928 adhered to contemporary notions of racial hierarchy, classifying 'half-castes', 'quadroons' and 'octoroons', according to their portion of 'white' blood, and granting them the chance to 'take their place in the white community and on as favorable a footing as possible' according to the proportion of 'white' blood.¹³³ If 'half-caste' women were to be assimilated into 'white' society, however, it followed that they would be segregated from their Aboriginal people. Assimilation made no allowances for cultural difference or hybrid identities.¹³⁴

Dr. Cecil Cook, Chief Protector of Aboriginals in the 1930s, was obsessed with population control and eugenics.¹³⁵ Cook's training had been in both tropical medicine and anthropology under Professor Radcliffe-Brown.¹³⁶ His long term plan was the absorption of 'half-castes' into the

¹³⁰Jessie Litchfield, 'Press Collect', unpublished manuscript, p. 107, MS 132, NLA.

¹³¹McGrath 'Aboriginal women workers...' p. 23; For further discussion of Aboriginal women and sexual relations with 'white' men see Ann McGrath, "'Black Velvet'", in *Born in the Cattle*, pp. 68-94; Markus, *Governing Savages*, pp. 14-15.

¹³²J. T. Beckett in *Commonwealth of Australia, Royal Commission on the Northern Territory, Minutes of Evidence*, Melbourne, 1920, p. 177.

¹³³J. W. Bleakley, 'The Aboriginals and Half-Castes of Central Australia and North Australia', *CPP*, Vol. 11, 1929, p.29.

¹³⁴Francesca Bartlett discusses the project to ensure that Aboriginal girls were trained to conform to the social rules and cultural rituals of white society in 'Clean, White Girls: Assimilation and Women's Work', *Hecate*, Volume XXV, no. i, 1999, p. 10.

¹³⁵*Northern Standard*, 11 July 1930, 23 January 1931. Before this time Cook took on the duties of Protector as is indicated in his Chairing of the 1930 Darwin Conference.

¹³⁶Markus, *Governing Savages*, p. 88. This course was run by the University of Sydney.

'white' population. The primary means of such absorption was to be controlled breeding. Whereas the controversial science of eugenics in this period argued for purity of 'blood' in order to ensure the perfection of the 'race', Cook's plan was to encourage the 'mating of white male and half-caste female, thereby gradually eliminating colour'.¹³⁷

Cook's project of controlled breeding was at the heart of policy decisions regarding domestic service. At the 1930 conference, Owen Rowe argued that Aboriginal domestic servants should not be hired out under the age of sixteen as the younger girls are 'most difficult to control'. He stated:

It would be a good idea to keep them in the Compound and turn them out as efficient workers. Unless this is done one cannot demand a decent wage for them because from 12 to 15 the halfcaste girl is more inclined to associate with the gins and blacks than she would after isolation in the Compound.¹³⁸

Segregation, in this case was intended to keep them from mixing with their Aboriginal families.

According to Tony Austin, conditions in the Half-Caste Home were far from congenial. Daisy Ruddick who lived in this house said they were always hungry and had to steal food. She also recalled being beaten.¹³⁹ When the conditions of the Half-Caste Home were queried at the 1930 conference, Cook defended himself, arguing that when 'one of them is removed to go to service there are always weeks of heart-burning and home-sickness and that speaks a lot for the home'.¹⁴⁰ Contrary to his intention, Cook's words paint a tragic picture of women as young as twelve being sent away against their will and made to work and live among strangers.¹⁴¹ Inara Walden similarly describes the process by which the NSW Protection Board used its 'wide-ranging custodial powers over children to shift hundreds of Aboriginal females from rural areas into service in Sydney'.¹⁴² This project was part of the attempt to isolate 'half-castes' from Aboriginal society.

¹³⁷Cook to Rev. Morley, APNR, 28 April 1931, A1/15 1936/ 6595, AA ACT. The Chief Protector of Western Australia, A. O. Neville, was similarly interested in controlled breeding and shared many policies and attitudes with Dr. Cook. See A. Haebich, *For Their Own Good*, University of Western Australia Press, Nedlands, 1988.

¹³⁸Darwin Conference, 1930, p. 86.

¹³⁹Tony Austin, *I Can Picture*, pp. 92-3; see also Tony Austin and Daisy Ruddick, ' "Talking About Cruel Things": Girls' Life in the Kahlin Compound, as told to Kathy Mills and Tony Austin', *Hecate*, Vol. xv, no. i, 1989, pp. 8-22.

¹⁴⁰Darwin Conference, 1930, p. 85.

¹⁴¹See file on T. Watkins, who was sent to Manly to be employed in domestic duties. A1/15 1927/21687 AA ACT.

¹⁴²Inara Walden, ' "That was slavery days" '.

In 1932, Cook wrote a report entitled 'Half-Caste Problem' in which he discussed the ramifications for the White Australia policy. Cook cited the 'white' population of the Northern Territory as 2,950 and the 'Half-Caste' population as 852. He predicted that in 20 years the 'half-caste' population would 'have reproduced sufficiently to become a predominant part of the local population'. His recommendation was:

To treat the Half-Caste as a white, educating him to compete on equal terms with the white citizen. In this way there will be little opportunity of the Half-Caste controlling the labour market except on the ground of merit. This procedure moreover opens another field in the solution of the urgent problem ... By elevating the girls to white standard it will be possible to marry an increasing number to white settlers, whilst the boys could be safely removed to centres of denser white population where they would be competent to take work on the same basis as white men, thereby reducing the coloured population of the Territory and very appreciably diminishing the coloured birth-rate.¹⁴³

This he argued would be a 'method by which the future of this country can be safeguarded in the absence of such radical methods as sterilization of the unfit and legalized abortion.'¹⁴⁴ Of the hundreds of government documents which dealt with issues of White Australia this is one of the most explicit and reveals the sheer inhumanity of 'racial' policy.¹⁴⁵

Cook's recommendations were put into practice in Darwin. In 1931, there were 27 males and 50 females living in the Half-Caste Home.¹⁴⁶ The following year the administration announced that the girls were to remain in Kahlin Compound where they could be 'trained' as domestic servants, and the boys were to be moved inland to Pine Creek.¹⁴⁷ Aboriginal labour as domestic servants cannot be viewed simply as a case of 'coloured' labour within White Australia. It served to further the government's plan to eradicate Aboriginality, through controlled 'breeding' and through enforced cultural assimilation.

¹⁴³Cook, Chief Protector of Aboriginals, to the Administrator, 23 July 1932, A1/15 33/479, AA ACT.

¹⁴⁴*Ibid.*

¹⁴⁵For a detailed discussion of Cook's work see Tony Austin, 'Cecil Cook, Scientific Thought and 'Half-Castes' in the Northern Territory, 1927-1939', *Aboriginal History*, 1990, 14:1, pp. 104-122.

¹⁴⁶Report on the Administration of the Northern Territory, 1931.

¹⁴⁷Cook to Administrator, 8 July 1936,

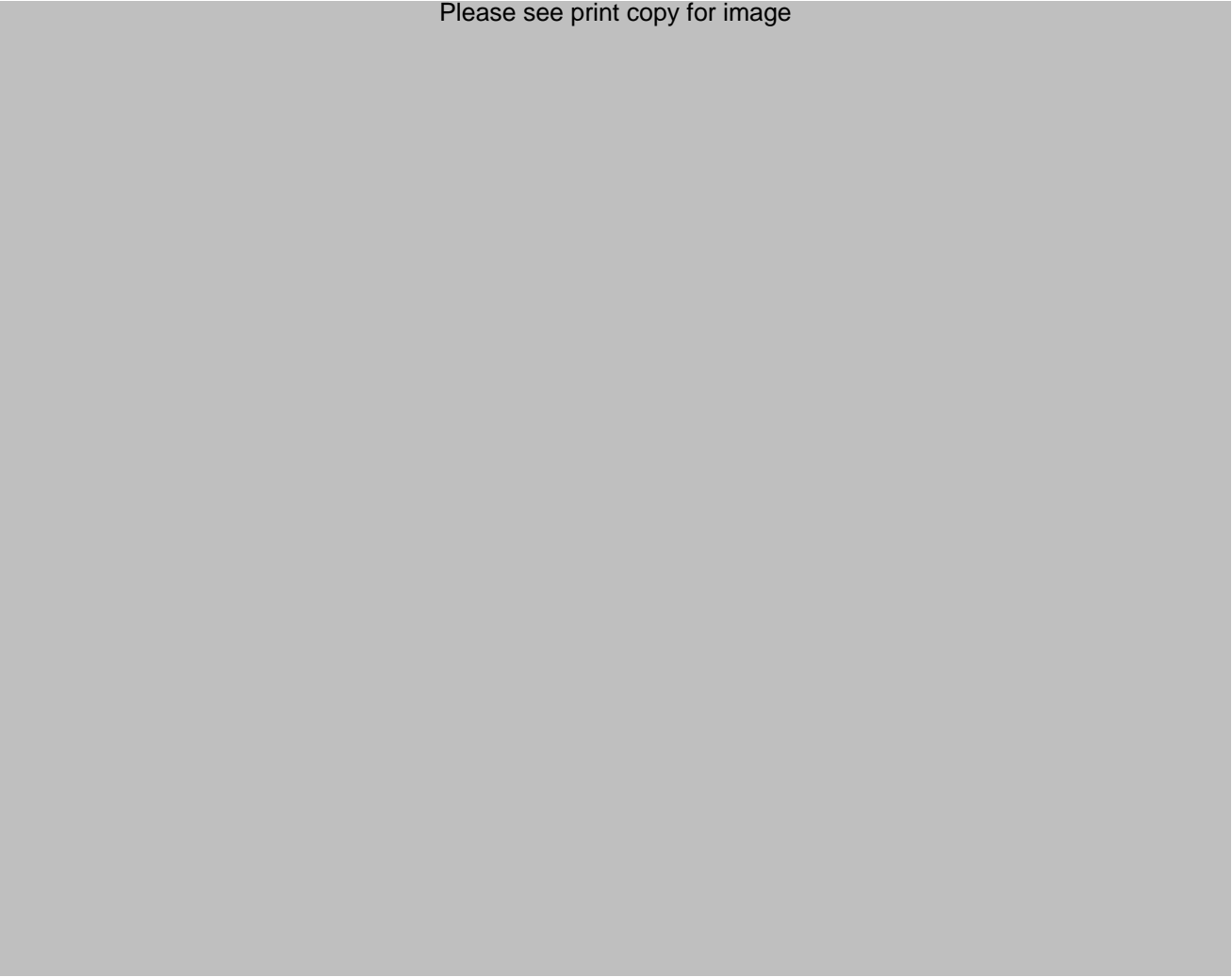
Conclusion

This case study of Aboriginal employment demonstrates that the exploitation of Aboriginal workers as domestic servants was both widely accepted and officially encouraged. Their status as workers was determined by both 'race' and gender and there was little room to manoeuvre within the strictly-enforced regulations of the Aboriginal Ordinance. This system of employment should have been unacceptable to a labour movement which espoused the White Australian ideology. Aboriginal employment was a remnant of the colonial system which promoted a racially stratified workforce. In previous chapters I have pointed to the difference between White Australian unionists and the colonials who favoured a Plural Australia. In practice, this ideological division was not so clear cut. The employment of Aboriginal servants was tacitly supported by the NAWU despite the fact that it had created in Darwin a 'racially' divided and segregated society. This was the very outcome which White Australia had sought to avoid.

This chapter has considered one of the darkest aspects of Darwin's twentieth century 'race' relations. There is no positive side to this shameful story. If this were the history of Plural Australia, then it would be characterised as a society of strict 'racial' hierarchy and segregation. And yet, this narrative is not representative of 'race' relations in Darwin as outlined in this thesis. In the following case studies, where the experiences of other ethnic groups are considered, it is possible to argue that Plural Australia developed over this period into a more integrated, mixed society. Aboriginal workers were not included in the new mixed society, but other 'coloured' workers were able to break through the barriers of White Australian exclusivism.

Working the wharf, SS 'Montoro', 15 July 1920.
(A659/1, 1939/1/10766, Wharfage facilities, Darwin, N.T., National Archives
of Australia, ACT)

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Chapter seven

'Local coloured lads'

This chapter examines the integration of 'coloured' workers into the NAWU, focusing on the so-called 'half-caste' waterside workers. The working experience of male 'half-castes' was totally unlike that of Aboriginal servants discussed in the previous chapter. The waterfront had been the primary site for the implementation of White Australian labour principles, and yet, ironically, the watersiders were the first to introduce a multi-ethnic workforce in which 'coloured' and white workers laboured together for equal wages. In considering this dramatic shift away from strict White Australian exclusionism, I have focused on the social and cultural activities which allowed bonds of friendship to develop between white and 'half-caste' waterside workers. In the masculine world of the NAWU, the two most important sites of bonding were the football field and the pub. In their attempts to include 'half-castes' within their working class community, the NAWU is presented as a protest group, fighting against the segregationist tendencies of the elite white population.

Conflict in 1922

The first organised attempt to employ 'half-caste' workers on the Darwin wharf was in 1922. As was discussed in chapter four, in this year the NTWU formed a breakaway union in opposition to the NAIU. The NAIU protested against the NTWU use of 'coloured' labour, arguing that the railway authorities were organising 'all available half-castes from the Aboriginal Compound to assist in breaking the movement'. They asked: 'Is this the first step towards colored labor for the Territory?'¹ The NAIU represented 'half-caste' workers stereotypically as cheap labour, arguing that 'coercion and bluff can make a half-caste do anything'.² But this attitude was to change quite dramatically. Ten years later, 'half-caste' worker, Johnny Ah Mat was chosen as the union delegate for the Sorting Shed Section.³ Gradually during

¹*Northern Standard*, 15 August 1922.

²'The Wharf Strike', *Northern Standard*, 11 August 1922.

³*Northern Standard*, 8 July 1932.

the 1930s NAWU came to accept 'half-caste' workers on equal terms with white workers.

In chapter four, I considered the role of communist ideology in changing attitudes towards Aboriginal workers. But, as was shown, not all of the unionists who supported 'half-caste' workers were in sympathy with the communist movement. Social connections need to be explored if we are to understand the degree of acceptance of 'half-castes' in the NAWU by the late 1930s. What is required, is what ethnographer Clifford Geertz, termed 'thick description', or a microhistory of Darwin's working-class community. This is possible in such a small community of waterside workers.⁴ Most of the evidence presented here is taken from oral histories and newspapers. Individual life histories enable us to build up a picture of the dynamics of 'race' relations in this period.

At no time would it have been possible to describe the Darwin waterside workers as an ethnically homogeneous workforce. Before 1911 the watersider workers were primarily Chinese and Filipino. After 1911, when wharf work was reserved for white workers, they were a mixture including Irish, Scottish, Greek and Russians. By the 1930s this mix included a large number of workers of varying ethnicity who loosely would have been termed 'coloured'.

In 1928, a highly critical article by Sir William Sowden, entitled 'Darwin — The Damned', described the 60-odd watersiders thus:

The men who handled our cargo so tenderly were mostly Greeks, Italians, Filipinos (who went to the Territory originally as luggermen at 25/- a week), nondescripts and various degrees of castes. There were not more than two or three Britons of any kind among them. This shows how thoroughly we preserve from pollution our "White Australia" ...⁵

His attack on the watersiders, whom he referred to collectively as 'Dagoes', 'foreigners' and 'dusky gentlemen', was chiefly aimed at their use of 'go slow' methods to achieve what he deemed to be 'excessive wages'. At the time Sowden was writing, the NAWU was in its first year, having recently amalgamated and thus strengthened its bargaining power. This suggests, therefore, that from the outset, the NAWU was prepared to offer waterside

⁴Compare Darwin with a large port like New Orleans which had 11,000 dock workers. See D. Rosenberg, *New Orleans Dockworkers: Race Labor, and Unionism, 1892-1923*, State University of New York Press, Albany, 1988, p. 1.

⁵*Argus*, Melbourne, 28 November 1927 reprinted in the *Northern Standard*, 13 January 1928.

work to workers whom others regarded as falling beyond the pale of White Australia. Ironically, in criticising their failure to uphold White Australia, Sowden ignored the fact that White Australia had primarily been intended to create an egalitarian society. The waterside workers were working towards that very goal, albeit within a broader conceptualisation of egalitarianism.

The employment of 'half-caste' labour on the wharf and their continued membership in the NAWU was questioned by the conservative administrator, Colonel Weddell, in 1933. In that year, Cochrane, alias Captain Trepang, wrote to the Minister for the Interior arguing that with unemployment at 150 in Darwin, the government should be placing 'half-castes' in the pearling and trepang industry, this being their 'natural work'. To be employed in the pearling industry, however, was to be employed outside the union award system. Weddell suggested that if they simply refused to grant relief work to unemployed 'half-caste' workers then they would be forced to take up pearling. He believed that

the chief bar to the employment ... of half-castes is the fact that they are given full citizen rights and permitted and enticed to become members of an Industrial Union. Our half-castes are mostly of the white-black cross, which produces a peculiar type not noted for its high mentality, and in my opinion I consider it would be beneficial to the Territory not to extend to them the privilege of being enrolled as electors ... further as time goes on the Half-Castes will 'swamp' and dominate the North Australian Workers' Union.⁶

A curious source of opposition to this scheme came from the Bishop of Carpentaria who fully supported the union stance, writing:

The Darwin half-castes, as a whole, are not naturally inclined to a sea-faring occupation ... [they] are admitted to and enjoy the privileges of the various sections of the North Australian Workers' Union. They are also admitted to sporting circles and there are pronounced instances where even certain Administrative officials have accepted offices in football clubs, the membership of which is composed mostly of half-castes; in fact some of these individuals appear to suffer from an acute anti-white complex. At Thursday

⁶Memo to the Department of the Interior, 3 May 1933, A1/15 1933/2419, National Archives of Australia (AA ACT).

Island the 'colour line' is drawn with rigid severity as compared to Darwin, and no coloured person is admitted to Union privileges.⁷

Even Dr. Cook, Chief Protector of Aboriginals, argued that 'half-castes' were entitled to the basic wage and that pearlers would never pay such a wage.

New Left historians have generally insisted on the power of structural administrative racism. This case demonstrates that unionism could act as an equally powerful force against such discrimination. On the other hand, while the NAWU unionists clearly supported the right of 'half-castes' to obtain equal wages, this did not necessarily correspond to a diminished sense of racism. Toupein, secretary during the early 1930s, and White Australian advocate, argued that 'half-castes' had ability and should be paid award wages, but stressed that this was to prevent them becoming 'a serious menace to the white workers'.⁸ He supported the policy of assimilation which advocated education for 'half-castes'.⁹ At no time, however, did Toupein suggest that they should include so-called 'full-blood' Aboriginal workers within the union. His support for 'half-castes' was based on their 'white blood'; they were 'the white man's offspring and should not be forced into aboriginal status'.¹⁰

Waterside workers in 1937

By 1937, the waterside section, with some 80 members, remained the most powerful group in the NAWU. Many belonged to the executive and as in previous years, the wharf was at the centre of union politics. A cursory glance at waterfront politics might have suggested a return to 1911 White Australian fervour. In 1936, NAWU secretary, Jack McDonald wrote an article titled 'White Australian Policy Flouted', in which he spoke on behalf of the Darwin waterside workers, and demanded that 'coolie' indentured pearling crews be prohibited from working on-shore, where they might compete with white union labour.¹¹ But even though he spoke of 'white' waterside workers, the term 'white' did not carry the same meaning as it had in 1911.

⁷Stanley, Pearling Inspector to Weddell, 4 April 1933, A1/15 1933/2419, AA ACT.

⁸Minutes of Darwin Conference on Aboriginal Employment, 1 May 1930, pp. 7-8, A1/15 1938/329, AA ACT.

⁹Toupein to Nelson, 22 August 1932 and 13 November 1929, A1/15 1933/479, AA ACT.

¹⁰*Ibid.*

¹¹McDonald, 'Indentured Labor in Darwin, White Australian Policy Flouted', *Northern Standard*, 24 January 1936; 'Union Notes', *Northern Standard*, 28 February 1936.

McDonald's use of the term 'white' was called into question by C.L.A. Abbott, a former Minister for the Interior in Canberra. Abbott had taken up the post of Administrator for the Territory in 1937. Being devoutly anti-labour, he immediately set about undermining the NAWU.¹² During the investigation into the Waterside Workers' Award, Abbott criticised the Arbitration Court for awarding Darwin waterside workers such high rates of pay. He questioned the worth of their labour and suggested that the workers were 'racially' inferior. As evidence, he presented a list of 81 names of waterside workers, including those of Italian, Greek, Spanish, Chinese and Malay background, and commented that the 'types and origins' of the workers were 'very mixed indeed'. Though the majority of names on the list were Irish and Scottish, Abbott explained that 'Half-Castes constitute a very large proportion of the English names appearing on this list'.¹³ These then, were the men that McDonald had described as white union labour. The meaning of the term 'white' was clearly ambiguous.

However McDonald chose to represent the watersiders, in Abbott's view they were 'coloured'. 'Coloured' was a vague term which was widely used in Darwin, and in other 'mixed' colonies to differentiate between those who were neither white nor black, with black referring to so-called 'full-blood' Aborigines. Abbott, whose ideas were distinctly colonial, was still of the opinion that 'coloured' labour was necessarily 'cheap' labour. As was discussed in the previous chapter, this correlation was still applied to Aboriginal servants. Failing to come to terms with the status of 'coloured' union labour, Abbott attempted to persuade the federal Arbitration Court to lower the wages of waterside workers on the basis of their 'race', thus forcing the NAWU unionists to defend their 'coloured' workers.¹⁴

This ambiguous use of White Australian rhetoric was common in this period. During a conflict between the Burns Philp steamer, the 'Montoro' and the NAWU in 1939, the steamer was forced to carry on 800 pipes for the Darwin water scheme. The ship's officers claimed that they were 'now firm believers in the abandonment of the White Australia policy as far as Darwin is concerned'. Burns Philp steamers were notorious for employing 'coloured' crews at cheap rates. McDonald, commented that the company clearly desired 'coolie rates and conditions to operate on the wharf'

¹²*Northern Standard*, 27 October 1936; *Bulletin*, 21 October 1936.

¹³Abbott to the Department of the Interior, 10 November 1937, F1 1939/68, National Archives of Australia, Northern Territory (AA NT).

¹⁴For discussion of 'competitive' racism see P. Van den Berghe, *Race and Ethnicity: Essays in Comparative Sociology*, Basic Books, New York, 1970, pp. 26-7.

as they did on board the ships.¹⁵ For Burns Philp officers the Darwin wharf labourers were part of the White Australian 'problem', meaning that they were militant unionists. But the White Australian unionists on the wharf were 'coloured'. What distinguished them from the ship's 'coolie' crew was that they were both 'coloured' and union members, working for award rates. It is no wonder that historians have tended to assume a white workforce in Australia when union rhetoric continued to conflate the terms white with unionised. By the late 1930s the White Australia policy had a new meaning — that of granting preference to unionist labour regardless of colour.

'Half-caste' waterside workers

An examination of the ethnic backgrounds of the waterside workers in 1937 reveals that those of British background were in the minority. Amongst those of European background there were Italians, Greeks, Dutch and Norwegians, while the majority of wharfies were categorised as 'half-caste'. This term was used for anyone who was deemed to be of mixed 'racial' background. Amongst the watersiders these included Spanish-Filipinos, Chinese-Australians, Malay-Aboriginal, Irish-Aboriginal and so on. These men, like Arthur Tye, for example, who was of Chinese-Australian background qualified for union membership under the 'mixed parentage' clause.¹⁶

For the purposes of this chapter, I propose to focus primarily on those workers who were deemed to be 'half-castes' under the ruling of the Aboriginal Department on the basis of their Aboriginal heritage. Even this category was made up of men of quite different ethnic backgrounds. Waterside worker, Johnny Ah Mat, for example, was the son of a Malay pearl-diver and a Torres Strait Islander woman.¹⁷ The Cubillo brothers were the children of a Filipino pearl diver and their mother was of Scottish-Aboriginal descent.¹⁸ In both these cases their local credentials on the waterfront were strong given their connections with ex-pearlers, many of whom now owned private fishing and trading luggers.

Val McGinness describes watersider Charlie Snape as being part Chinese-Aboriginal, but he also comments that his mother was Kureol and

¹⁵'Darwin News in Southern Newspapers', *Northern Standard*, 10 March 1939.

¹⁶R. H. Weddell to Department of the Interior, 10 December 1934, 654/1, 40/1/2189, AA ACT.

¹⁷Interview by author with Frank Ah Mat, Darwin, 13 June 1997.

¹⁸Inez Cubillo Carter, 'Cubillo, Delphin Antonio', in D. Carment and B. James(eds.), *Northern Territory Dictionary of Biography, Volume Two*, NTU Press, Darwin, 1992, pp. 43-4.

that they could speak his mother's language, Amangal.¹⁹ Others, such as the Scully brothers and their adopted brother Bill Muir were of British-Aboriginal descent. One cannot assume, however, that this gave them higher status in the eyes of the union. Contemporary notions of 'racial' hierarchy did not necessarily distinguish between 'half-castes' according to their 'British blood', nor even the darkness of their skin. Social standing was far more complex in Darwin.

The NAWU organised the casual labourers into three semi-permanent gangs.²⁰ There was no 'racial' division within the gangs — each had a mixture of workers. There is no evidence to suggest that 'half-caste' workers were forced to take on the more physically taxing jobs such as working in the ship's hold, nor that they could not hold positions of seniority.²¹ Certainly, the union did not judge its workers according to 'racial' stereotypes. There were over one hundred unemployed men in Darwin in 1937. On the list of Relief Workers each worker was judged by the union as fair, good or poor, but there was no correlation between this assessment and the worker's 'race'. Furthermore, there were capable white workers on the unemployed list while 'coloured' workers remained employed as waterside workers. This suggests that white workers were not given preferential treatment.²²

There is no doubt that work on the wharf was arduous. Wharfies were sometimes required to work shifts exceeding 30 hours and the tropical heat made temperatures in the hold almost unbearable. Unlike the case of Aboriginal servants, however, the union did not simply accept poor conditions. The waterside section continued to be notorious for its repeated strikes. The results of strong unionism showed in wage rates. Wharfies received 4/- per hour for normal hours, 6/- per hour after 5 p.m. and 8/- after midnight. According to the 1937 Payne and Fletcher Report this was almost double the rates paid in Brisbane and was higher than any other tropical port.²³ Those 'half-castes' on the wharf could earn £15 in a month, while

¹⁹Val McGinness, Transcript of interview with Janet Dickson, p.1. T.3, TS 532, NTRS 226, 1984, NTAS. Val says that Aborigines took on European names if they worked for a person for a long time. Tommy Yimabuk and Norman Barrawa, who worked for solicitors, Lyons and Harris became known as Tommy Lyons and Norman Harris. Thus the surname need not indicate paternity.

²⁰There were approximately 45 men on the wharf and 18 in the Sorting Shed, Letter to the Department of the Interior, 1937, F1 1937/264, AA NT.

²¹As for example Johnny Ah Mat. *Northern Standard*, 8 September 1936, listing members of no. 2 Gang.

²²Relief Workers List, Darwin, 1937, F1 1938/890, AA NT.

²³Payne and Fletcher, 'Report into Land and Land Industries of the Northern Territory of Australia', October 1937, in *Commonwealth Parliamentary Papers*, 1937, pp. 78-82.

Aboriginal workers employed through the Aboriginal Department earned approximately £15 in a year.²⁴

For the most part, histories of Darwin have emphasised the repressive nature of the administration and its suppression of Darwin's Aboriginal residents. Tony Austin, for example, describes the derogatory use of the term 'half-caste' in the context of the 1930s when notions of 'racial purity' were used to determine social status.²⁵ That this prejudice was prevalent amongst Darwin's elite is not disputed. Xavier Herbert's *Capricornia* which describes Darwin society in the late 1920s speaks of entrenched discrimination. Baldwin Spencer, writing in 1912, observed: 'One thing is certain and that is that the white population as a whole will never mix with half-castes'. Gordon Reid points out that, as was the case in Queensland at that time, Spencer advocated that 'half-castes' be encouraged to mix and marry with 'full-bloods' and so limit the 'contamination' of the European race.²⁶ What is missing from these accounts however, is the role of the NAWU in promoting class solidarity with 'half-caste' workers. Within the context of their working-class community the 'half-caste' waterside workers had greater agency than paternalistic restrictions would appear to allow. Those who were part of large, established families had the additional support of family networks which were of significant importance in the small community.²⁷ This was in stark contrast to those who had been taken from their families by the Aboriginal Department and isolated in the Darwin 'Half-Caste Home'.²⁸

'Australian' footballers

The social status of waterside workers was only partially related to the workplace. Most wharfies were employed for only five days in the month, and thus, the majority of their time was spent engaged in activities such as

²⁴Based on six shillings per week if employed through the Aboriginal Department. C.L.A. Abbott to Secretary of the Department of the Interior, 10 February 1938, F1 1939/408, AA NT.

²⁵Tony Austin, *I Can Picture the Old Home So Clearly: The Commonwealth and 'Half-caste' Youth in the Northern Territory 1911-1939*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, 1993. Note the use of the term 'Quadroon' in 'Return of Halfcastes and Quadroons in the N.T.', 28 February 1926. A1/15 1926/5350, AA ACT.

²⁶Gordon Reid, *A Picnic with the Natives: Aboriginal-European Relations in the Northern Territory to 1910*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, 1990, p.194.

²⁷Inez Cubillo Carter, 'Cubillo, Delphin Antonio', pp. 43-44; B. James, 'Muir, William Daniel (Bill)' in *Northern Dictionary of Biography*, Volume Two, pp. 137-8.

²⁸Babe Damasco, Transcript of interview by T. Milliken, pp. 34-6, TS 185, NTRS 226, 1977, NTAS; Val McGinness Interview, Tape 3, p. 1; Jessie Litchfield, 'Press Collect', unpublished manuscript, MS 132, NAL.

fishing, hunting, drinking and playing football.²⁹ Of these, Australian Rules Football was the most important in determining social standing within the predominantly masculine union culture. There were several teams in Darwin in 1937, but the most successful, and the 1936 Premiers, was the Buffaloes.³⁰ The captain of the Buffaloes, was one of the Ah Mat brothers and indeed, Johnny Ah Mat's grandson, Robert Ah Mat continues the family tradition, playing for the Swans AFL team.³¹ In the 1930s, the majority of the Buffaloes team were 'half-caste' and a good number were waterside workers.³² There was a clear connection between the wharf and the football field. The union stevedore on the wharf, also acted as central umpire for matches.³³ NAWU president, Bob Murray hailed the prowess of the Buffaloes in the *Northern Standard* making heroes of these watersiders.³⁴

On occasion, the success of the Buffaloes inspired some members of the elite administrative staff, to play on their team. Racial barriers were more readily removed in the name of good football.³⁵ This extended to other social occasions when the Buffalo Football Club hosted celebratory dances.³⁶ The continued success of 'coloured' players had altered public opinion and as Richard Broome has argued, sporting successes represent 'enduring moments of Aboriginal dominance' and allow historians to emphasise 'Aborigines as active subjects'.³⁷ From a contemporary assimilationist perspective, the mastery of Australian Rules Football was proof that 'coloured' workers were indeed part of 'White Australia'.³⁸ Colin Tatz has argued that 'sport is a measure of Australian racism', but it is more than

²⁹Abbott to Department of the Interior, 10 November 1937, F1 1939/408, AA NT.

³⁰The Buffaloes was formed in 1916 by Reuben Cooper after some members of a Combined Team had objected to playing with a 'half-caste'. Nevertheless, Cooper went on to play for Vesteys as their only 'coloured' player. He still played for the Buffaloes in 1937. *Northern Standard*, 13 November 1936, 5 January 1937; *Northern Territory Times*, 16 March, 29 September, 1916; Anne Briggs, 'Cooper, Reuben John' in D. Carment, Robyn Maynard, Alan Powell (eds.) *Northern Territory Dictionary of Biography, Volume One: To 1945*, NTU Press, Darwin, 1990, pp. 62-3.

³¹Robert Ah Mat previously played for Collingwood. See *Sydney Morning Herald*, 30 April 1997, p.45; 11 October 1997.

³²Another waterside worker, Harry Hazelbain, an Aboriginal man from Finiss River was remembered as being a good football player. Victor Villafior, Interview with author, 16 December 1996, Darwin.

³³'NT Football,' *Northern Standard*, 14 February 1936.

³⁴Note that several wharfies played on the Wallabies football team which was also a mixed team. *Northern Standard*, 20 March 1936.

³⁵*Northern Standard*, 6 November 1936; Bishop of Carpentaria in letter from Stanley, Pearling Inspector to Weddell, 4 April 1933, A1/15 1933/2419, AA ACT; Relief Workers List, F1, 1938/890, AA NT.

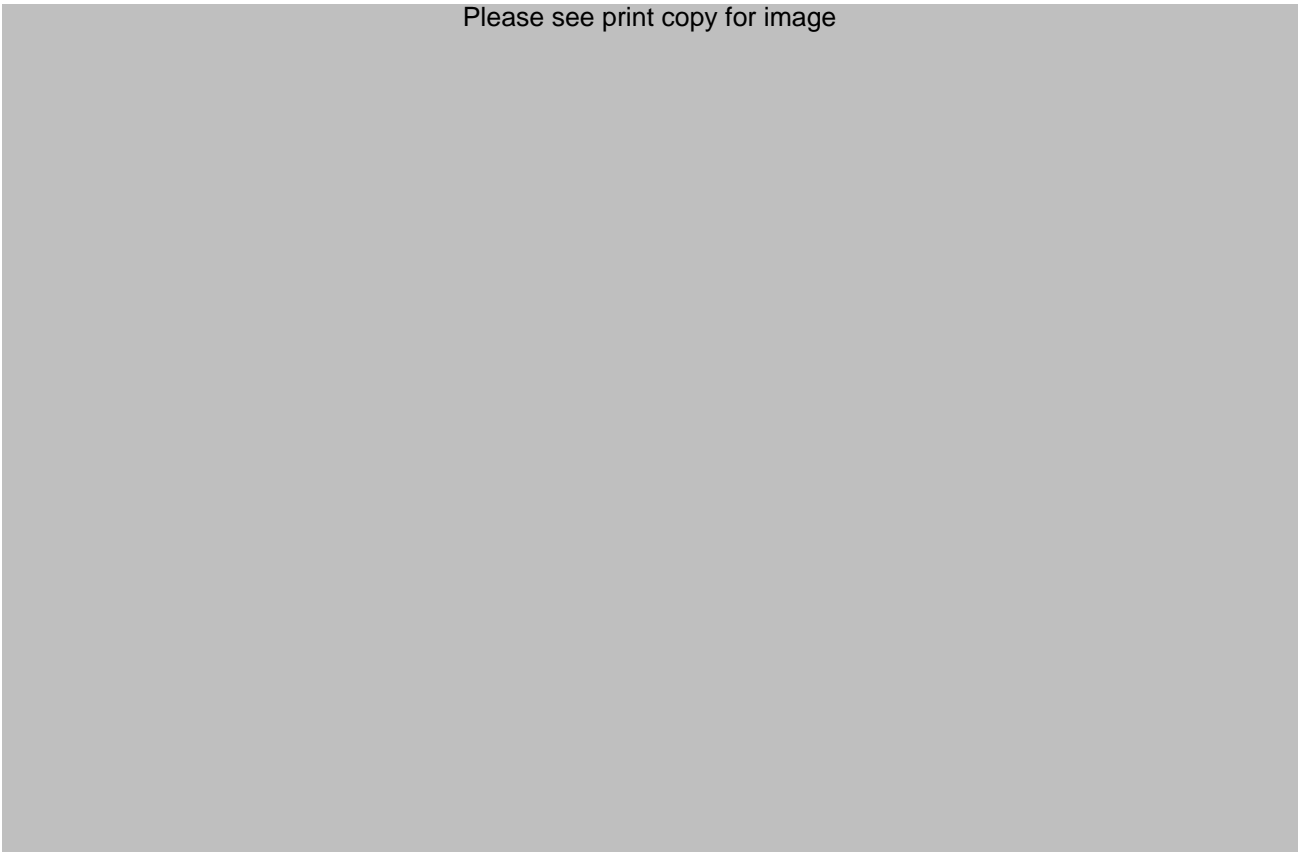
³⁶*Northern Standard*, 10 November, 13 November 1936; Eric Sager, *Discovering Darwin, The 1930 in memory and history*, Historical Society of the Northern Territory, Darwin, 1993, p. 40.

³⁷Richard Broome, 'Enduring Moments of Aboriginal Dominance: Aboriginal Performers, Boxers and Runners', *Aboriginal Workers*, special issue of *Labour History*, no. 69, November, 1995. p. 171; SBS documentary, *As it Happened: Buffalo Legends*, screened 25 September 1997.

³⁸Phil Vasili argued, in contrast, that black footballer, Tull, in Britain, though famous, had won a 'pyrrhic victory', given that his achievements were defined in such a way as to imply innate 'racial' qualities, emphasising physical prowess in terms of black 'animalism'. See 'Walter Daniel Tull, 1888-1918: soldier, footballer, Black', *Race and Class*, Vol. 38, October-December 1996, no. 2, p. 60.

Football Team (Buffaloes)
(Val McGinness Collection, NTRS 234 PP 128 Item 2, Northern Territory
Archives Service)

Please see print copy for image



L-R Don Bonson, Joe McGinness, Reuben Cooper, Jack McGinness, Arthur Wright, Laurence Cubillo, Charlie Snape, Walter Lew Fatt, Babe Damasco, Keith Howton (umpire), Bill McLennon, Johnny AhMat, Eddie Cubillo, Billy Clarke.

that; it was a site of contestation, where opposing forces for exclusion and inclusion were in conflict.³⁹

This phenomenon of 'mixed' football and the degree of acceptance it suggested had been popularly accepted in Darwin some twenty years earlier. The captain of the original Vesteys football team up until 1920 was Reuben Cooper, a well-known and respected 'half-caste' who learnt football at Prince Alfred College in Adelaide.⁴⁰ Many of the waterside workers were already well-known as footballers and umpires as early as 1928.⁴¹

The bonds of friendship between the football players had been strengthened through their common experience of adversity. In 1926, a group of white players forced the introduction of a white only football League and banned all 'coloured' players from the field.⁴² Writing in the *Northern Standard*, one commentator, 'Fairplay' stated that the

cloven hoof of prejudice and sectarianism still lives and promises to rise from its ashes in as virulent form as in the past. That the coloured boys in their native land should be debarred by the imported article from playing football ... I quite agree there should be vote taken of Darwin residents interested in fairplay, as football will certainly become mediocre without them. ... There should be no colour line bringing back the dead past to Darwin ...⁴³

It is interesting that as early as 1927, it was possible for some to relegate virulent racial prejudice to a 'dead past'.

In protest, the local community boycotted the white-only games, and attendance fell from several hundred to a mere handful.⁴⁴ New mixed teams were formed to play soccer instead of football.⁴⁵ Local unionists at the time were quite adamant that the 'coloured lads' were not only welcome, but essential to keeping up the standard of the game. In a letter to the editor, entitled 'The Color Line', H. Edwards, delegate of the Vesteys team complained that

³⁹Tatz, Colin, 'Racism and Sport in Australia', *Race and Class*, Volume 36, April-June 1995, no. 4, p. 43. For a broader study Aboriginal sporting heroes see Colin Tatz, *Obstacle Race: Aborigines in Sport*, University of New South Wales Press, Sydney, 1995.

⁴⁰'Football', *Northern Territory Times*, 24 January 1920; 20 April 1920.

⁴¹Watersiders in 1928 football teams include J. Ah Mat, C. Snape, J and L Cubillo, 'Football', *Northern Standard*, 17 February, 2 March 1928.

⁴²'NT Football League', suggesting that the oval be restricted to 'whites', *Northern Standard*, 12 November 1926.

⁴³'Football' *Northern Standard*, 28 January 1927.

⁴⁴*Northern Standard*, 29 March 1927.

⁴⁵*Northern Standard*, 1 April 1927.

it is difficult to understand what objections anyone can have to playing with the colored lads, except, perhaps their superiority of play. ... This movement to disenfranchise the locals from participation in football comes mainly from birds of passage who are here to-day and gone to-morrow...⁴⁶

There were six white men from the original mixed Vestey team who agreed to play with the new white League. The old NTFL was disbanded in March 1927.⁴⁷ Protestors pointed out that it was Reuben Cooper who had 'taught more local lads (of both colors) than any other player at present in the game'.⁴⁸ It was shameful that he should now be banned from playing.

What makes this struggle over football particularly significant was that it was one area in which the communist and Laborites were unanimously in favour of internationalist principles. The public meeting to discuss the problem of racial prejudice in football was led by communist Mahoney and supported by Laborites Nelson and Murray. The *Northern Standard* reported that a 'fairly large crowd assembled' to discuss the re-entry of the 'coloured boys' into the Football League.

Mr. Mahoney, in opening the meeting said that debarring of the coloured boys in the local football arena was a violation of the fundamental principles of sport. Sport is international. In the great games and sporting competitions of the world all nations compete, irrespective of colour or creed; whatever the game ... The local coloured boys compete with the white in all local athletic sporting events. That being so, they should be good enough to play football with. ... It is a disgrace that good players who could help to raise the game to a much higher plane were debarred from playing. The coloured players and supporters should hammer away until all the coloured players are permitted to enter the League and play the game.

⁴⁶*Northern Standard*, 31 December 1926.

⁴⁷*Northern Standard*, 25 March 1927.

⁴⁸*Northern Standard*, 10 January 1928. Note that 17 February 1928 *Northern Standard*, NA Football League still appears to be white but there is a second notice for Vesteys vs Wanderers which is a mixed team, including Chinese. White NA League, (Waratahs, Buffaloes and Magpies) are postponing their semi-final match as 'white' Buffaloes cannot field a team.

As the founding member of the Darwin AWU and Member for parliament, Harold Nelson spoke against the 'colour line' and argued that they did not want to base their society on 'colour and caste' as was done in Singapore. He explicitly rejected this British colonial model of a divided multi-racial society. Bob Murray echoed this rejection of segregation, suggesting that it would be best if they did not simply form one team of 'coloured' players, but to divide the 'coloured' players evenly amongst three mixed teams.⁴⁹

After the football league was reorganised there were two mixed teams. The Waratahs, whose players belonged to the original segregationist group of elite public servants and business men, remained all white. In 1933, the Wanderers team was comprised of white, Chinese and 'half-caste' players, including at least three waterside workers.⁵⁰ The Buffaloes was also a mixed team in that year, their players also including watersiders.⁵¹ Only the Waratahs continued to protest, adopting rough play tactics in an attempt to intimidate the so-called 'colored boys' on the field.⁵²

A similar incident occurred in 1937 when the Garrison team, made up of recently-arrived southern soldiers, were actively hostile towards 'coloured' players. One local commentator criticised their poor sportsmanship, writing that: 'one gathers that the "flower of the nation's manhood" hates taking a hiding from coloured boys.' He mockingly commented that the Garrison team, though specially selected for their good "blood stock", were nevertheless unable to beat the local team of mainly coloured boys.⁵³ Interestingly, this critic was himself chided by the unionists who felt that he too was slighting the players. NAWU Secretary, McDonald, responded with outrage, feeling that the honour of the Buffaloes was at stake:

By inference and innuendo he suggests that the Buffs are on a lower scale mentally and physically ... If the essence of sport is good sportsmanship, then the quintessence of bad sportsmanship is to try and raise bad feeling between teams and the surest way to do that is to plant the seeds of racial hatred.⁵⁴

⁴⁹'Readmittance of coloured players', 11 December 1928.

⁵⁰Wanderers players included watersiders Tybell, Villaflor and Cubillo, 'Football', *Northern Standard*, 20 January 1933.

⁵¹Watersiders included J. Ah Mat, C. Snape and J. Lee. 'Football', *Northern Standard*, 13 January 1933.

⁵²'Football', *Northern Standard*, 17 January 1933.

⁵³*Northern Standard*, 9 March 1937.

⁵⁴*Northern Standard*, 12 March 1937.

The Garrison team responded to the situation by choosing ominous nicknames, including Ku Klux Kollias and Murderer McLellan for their next match.⁵⁵ Confronted with a Garrison victory in the 1937 premiership, a local combined team was formed which included the best of the 'coloured' players, three of whom were waterside workers, with the best of the white Administration staff players and together they played (and lost) against the Garrison. This football match took on symbolic importance as white and 'coloured' Darwinites rallied against the racist Garrison team.⁵⁶ If racism appeared to be an accepted part of Darwin society in the case study of Aboriginal servants, here we see quite another side of the local community; one which leaned towards integration and solidarity rather than segregation.

Drinking mates

Another social activity which created bonds of friendship between waterside workers was drinking. According to Xavier Herbert, himself a waterside worker in Darwin, working-class men were judged according to their ability to hold their drink, with the most accomplished being dubbed 'Booze Artists'.⁵⁷ In this respect the 'half-caste' workers were at a disadvantage as the Aboriginal Act denied them the right to drink alcohol. Many simply ignored the restrictions and there are stories of wild beach parties which testify to their rebellion.⁵⁸ Disputes over the serving of alcohol to 'half-castes' were evident as early as 1920. After a court conviction for supplying alcohol was queried the *Northern Territory Times* reported that there were 'half-castes who belong to the A.W.U. and who are openly served with liquor at the State hotels'.⁵⁹

The NAWU consistently argued that 'half-castes' should be entitled to drink in hotels. In 1931, after the communist members of the union took up the cause, Laborite, Owen Rowe wrote:

The Communists have taken up the case of beer for the halfcastes. Strange how the brilliant leaders of the local commune seize on the least essential points of a case and flog it to death! This bagman is in favour of the halfcaste having the right to go and have a booze the same as any other "Cullud gentleman," or white, in the Territory. ...

⁵⁵*Northern Standard*, 25 March 1937.

⁵⁶'Benefit Match', *Northern Standard*, 16 April 1937.

⁵⁷Xavier Herbert, *Capricornia*, Pacific Books, Sydney, 1937, p.10; *Northern Standard*, 29 March 1938.

⁵⁸Herbert, *Capricornia*, pp. 16-7; Babe Damasco Interview.

⁵⁹'Supplying Liquor to Abos.', *Northern Territory Times*, 4 November 1920.

The halfcaste attains citizenship at 21 and though bagmen are as a rule not lawyers, this bagman thinks that a prosecution of any halfcaste for drinking in a hotel ... is illegal.⁶⁰

The difficulty, of course, was that under the White Australia policy citizenship did not mean equal citizenship. 'White' citizens were the only 'real' citizens, while 'coloured' citizens, be they of Aboriginal or Asian descent were subject to a myriad of discriminatory regulations intended to limit their civil rights.

The issue of drinking alcohol was not resolved and in 1936, the Darwin 'Half-Caste Association' was formed to combat this and other restrictions. The association had close links with the NAWU with several prominent members being waterside workers. Their petition to the Minister, asking for exemption from the Aboriginal Act was granted and by 1937 'half-castes', who were no longer 'deemed to be half-castes' under the Act, were in a position to drink with their work mates.⁶¹ Exemptions, however, only served to emphasise the distinction between white and 'half-caste' as they were granted only on condition of good behaviour. The certificates were promptly given the nickname of 'dog's licences'. According to Joe McGinness, the police could demand proof of exemption at anytime.⁶² During this time, a number of 'half-caste' waterside workers were arrested and charged with drunkenness. In most cases the charges were dropped or they were given a fine of £1. To place this in context, however, a number of white waterside workers were also arrested, including Tom Healey, secretary of the Waterside Section.⁶³

While the NAWU had hoped for full citizenship rights for their members, the fiasco of exemptions demonstrated the continuing administrative paternalism. Cecil Cook, Chief Protector was unwilling to relinquish control over 'half-castes' and retained the right to revoke exemptions, arguing:

Although these half-castes have been virtually removed from the control of the Aboriginal Branch it is not intended that they should be permitted to abuse the privileges so bestowed on them. ... This new

⁶⁰'The Bagman's Gazette', *Northern Standard*, 29 September 1931.

⁶¹Government Gazette, *Northern Standard*, 29 May 1936.

⁶²Joe McGinness, *Son of Alyandabu, My fight for Aboriginal Rights*, University of Queensland Press, St. Lucia, 1991, pp. 24-5.

⁶³*Northern Standard*, 14 February, 2 September, 27 October, 30 October, 10 November 1936, 25 March, 9 April 1937.

measure, in effect, offers the individual half-caste an opportunity of proving himself worthy of trust, thereby improving his outlook and stimulating his absorption into the white community.⁶⁴

Citizenship rights were not granted as inalienable rights, but as privileges requiring obedience to the rules laid down by the Chief Protector.⁶⁵

But one should not confuse the paternalism of the government with the attitudes of the union. NAWU President, Bob Murray, wrote a letter criticising the so-called Protection system. He scoffed and argued that 'half-castes' should always have been allowed to have a drink the same as 'whites, Japanese, Kopangers and many others without being licensed like a dog.'⁶⁶ He wrote:

Would the atrocities that go on to-day among the half-caste population continue if they had some direct representation where they could be heard and tell the Minister how they are being robbed and exploited by those who are supposed to be their protectors. Matters have been put to me of late and it is hard to believe such conditions existed. The question has been raised several times in the Federal Parliament if it were possible to find anybody to represent these people. ... I say, Mr. Editor, yes. I know many whom I can recommend. There are Jim and Harry Stott. Reuben Cooper with a college education is also quite competent. There is the McGuinness [sic] family with public school educations. There is the Ah Mat family. The Huddleston boys on the Western Australian side are also educated enough to take up the fight for the rights of these people and possibly many more that I do not call to mind at the moment.⁶⁷

The social ties between white and 'coloured' workers were also demonstrated in the social life of Police Paddock. This was the area set aside in 1911 for the permanent 'coloured' residents. It was a multi-ethnic community which had taken on the qualities of a South East Asian village, even to the extent of using Malay as its *lingua franca*. In Police Paddock, any

⁶⁴C. Cook, 'Report of Chief Protector', Report on the Administration of the Northern Territory for the year ended 30th June, 1936, CPP.

⁶⁵See also Russell McGregor, *Imagined Destinies, Aboriginal Australians and the Doomed Race Theory, 1880-1939*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, 1997, p. 166.

⁶⁶*Northern Standard*, 27 April, 1937.

⁶⁷Bob Murray, *Northern Standard*, 27 April 1937.

Europeans who had chosen to marry into the 'coloured' community were welcomed.⁶⁸ Administrative influence over Police Paddock was mitigated by the fact that they were largely self-sufficient through fish traps, vegetable gardens, and hunting. The unemployed men who drifted into Darwin made their base near Police Paddock and came to appreciate the solidarity of the 'coloured' community. The Ah Mats, for example held parties with entertainment provided by the local 'half-caste' Filipino and Malay bands whose musicians also happened to be waterside workers. The communist Unemployed Workers Movement repaid their hospitality by inviting 'half-castes' to Saturday night dances where all 'colours and creeds' were welcome.⁶⁹

The internationalists in Darwin did not hesitate to publicly attack the elite 'silvertails' over their segregationist attitudes. 'Worker' wrote:

It makes one sick to read the rot and piffle that Mr. Conigrave is 'dishing out' to the Southern people. He is alleged to have stated that the White's sit in lounge chairs in the front of the picture house, and the Colored sit in the back seats. ... the people who occupy the front chairs are petty officials, their 'hangers on' and 'would-be's' ... a good many Whites sit with the colored people.⁷⁰

Again the issue of segregation is represented in terms of class difference, with many working-class whites preferring to socialise with the 'coloured' community.

This class division is captured to some degree in Xavier Herbert's *Capricornia*. His descriptions of Darwin were drawn during the same year as that of 'Worker'. *Capricornia* is most often interpreted as proof of endemic racism, but Herbert himself insisted that the novel was meant to show his 'adoration of Australia'. Herbert invites us to follow his own initiation in Darwin's society. Initially he knows nothing but the society of parading, pompous 'potentates', but gradually he uncovers the other side of Darwin and begins to appreciate the complexities of its 'coloured' community.⁷¹

There has been a tendency, in discussing Darwin, to depict the white population as colonial masters, ignoring the role of white workers. Richard

⁶⁸John Magripilis, Transcript of interview by Helen Wilson, 1994, TS 802, NTRS 266, NTAS; see Herbert, *Capricornia*, pp. 17-18.

⁶⁹Litchfield, 'Press Collect', p. 141.

⁷⁰'Worker', 'Conigrave's Piffle', *Northern Standard*, 14 August 1928.

⁷¹Herbert, *Capricornia*, p. 7.

Broome's description of Darwin in *Aboriginal Australians*, borrowed from *Capricornia*:

Darwin was a typical colonial town, highly stratified socially and residentially along racial lines. The white colonial masters, bureaucrats and employers lived in fine leafy Myilly Point; the Chinese in a shanty town; and the Aborigines, the lowest social class in this colour-conscious community, lived either in humpies in Kahlin Compound or among the mangroves at nearby Frances Bay.⁷²

Broome's account is not without a labour history perspective. He goes on to describe the exploitation of Aboriginal servants in Darwin.⁷³ What is missing from his account, however, is the white unionist perspective. Xavier Herbert, writing a fictional account of Darwin, chose not to emphasise the story of white workers as unionists and activists, choosing instead to parody the 'colonial' administrative staff. Ironically, Herbert himself was part of the union movement, which is why he viewed the elite with such contempt.⁷⁴ Nowhere in *Capricornia*, however, is there a detailed account of unionist activities. It is only within a working class perspective of Darwin that one can find images of worker solidarity to act as counterpoint to colonial elitism.

Problematising assimilation

Raelene Frances supports what is seen as a 'realistic' view of Aboriginal agency over the 'romantic' view of some 'revisionists'.⁷⁵ The revisionism that is being referred to is the tendency to look for positive experiences of 'race' relations in which Aboriginal subjects are given some degree of agency to determine the course of their life. The revisionist method is in answer to the early left-wing critiques of our racist past which have tended to emphasise only conflict and oppression. Attwood suggests that while 'revisionists' may not yet have achieved a balance between the 'oppositional' and romantic views, they nevertheless have succeeded in recasting Aborigines as 'active agents rather than passive objects' and

⁷²Richard Broome, *Aboriginal Australians, Black Responses to White Dominance 1788-1994*, Second Edition, Allen & Unwin, St Leonards, 1994, p. 121.

⁷³The employment of Aboriginal servants is discussed in Chapter six of this thesis.

⁷⁴Harry Heseltine, *Xavier Herbert*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1973, p. 7.

⁷⁵R. Frances, B. Scates, & A. McGrath, "Broken Silences? Labour History and Aboriginal Workers" in T. Irving(ed.), *Challenges to Labour History*, Sydney: UNSW Press, 1994, p. 210.

rescued them from anonymity.⁷⁶ One of the dangers in rescuing 'half-caste' workers from anonymity, is that their stories might present integration or assimilation in an unproblematic fashion. The assimilationist trend of the 1930s was a positive force in that it improved the conditions and standing of 'half-castes' within the white community. It must be remembered, however, that the price of acceptance was the rejection of their Aboriginal heritage. Acceptance was only possible for those who abided by the rules set by the dominant White Australian culture. The fact that this case involved a working-class culture did not lessen its hegemony in this instance.

For unionists, such as NAWU secretary, Jack McDonald, the White Australia policy remained a guiding principle and 'half-castes' were expected to live up to supposedly white standards. So-called 'full-blood' Aboriginal people, however, remained a separate 'race', unable to be included in this broader definition of 'whiteness'. McDonald may have championed the 'half-caste' cause but he did not hesitate to boycott Aboriginal labour.⁷⁷ His position is well-illustrated in a letter he wrote to the Minister on behalf of his friend, Donald Bonson, stating:

He has the colour and characteristics of a white man, yet as the law stands, he is classed as a half-cast. He is a printer in the office of the 'Northern Standard', a prominent footballer, and a good citizen. He feels his position very keenly, and I think he impressed you favourably during the interview. I feel, Sir, that it would be a graceful act on your part, to so amend the regulations, that he would not be driven to associate with the men who are herded together in the Compound.⁷⁸

For McDonald, the division between Aboriginal people in the compound and near white 'half-castes' was based on both colour and cultural characteristics. He apparently assumes that 'half-caste' workers shared his distaste for the company of compound residents. The enforced segregation between these two sections of the Aboriginal community was clearly a demonstration of the oppressive power of White Australia.

This division within the indigenous population was a common phenomenon in 'mixed' colonies. In the Dutch East Indies, for example, according to Wertheim, people of mixed descent were treated equally with

⁷⁶Attwood, Bain, *The Making of the Aborigines*, Allen & Unwin, St Leonards, 1989, pp. 136-138.

⁷⁷Patrick McDonald, Transcript of interview with Ciena Fitzgerald, 1991, TS 655, NTRS 226, NTAS, *Northern Standard*, 28 February 1936.

⁷⁸J. A. McDonald to T. Paterson, Minister for the Interior, 6 January 1936, F1 1936/112, AA NT.

whites and yet there remained some 'racial' discrimination. Their social status, he argued was to a large extent, 'determined by physical characteristics' that is by the degree to which they looked European.⁷⁹

Even as adult male 'half-castes' were making their way up in the NAWU, there was another generation of children whose lives were absolutely bound up in the repressive grip of the Aboriginal Department and its forced assimilation plans. In 1932, there was a protest in the *Northern Standard*, over the government's Aboriginal policy with regard to 'half-caste' children. An article titled 'Blackbirding', spoke of the 'callously brutal treatment' of six children who had arrived in Darwin on a truck, one as young as fifteen months, leaving behind a 'frantic mother'. The article read:

The general public are unable to understand the reason for practically kidnapping these children ... The Darwin half-castes home is already crowded and cramped. The half-castes evidently suffer from too much Government protection and too little human sympathy and kindly treatment. A good number of local officials severely condemn the policy of tearing these children away from their parents and home life on stations, a practice prevalent for years past.⁸⁰

Again there appears to be a gap between official policy and public opinion and yet the NAWU, at this time was complicit in this policy.

As was discussed in chapter six, at the 1930 conference on Aboriginal employment, NAWU organiser Owen Rowe, argued that Aboriginal domestic servants should not be hired out under the age of sixteen as the younger girls are 'most difficult to control'. He stated:

It would be a good idea to keep them in the Compound and turn them out as efficient workers. Unless this is done one cannot demand a decent wage for them because from 12 to 15 the halfcaste girl is more inclined to associate with the gins and blacks than she would after isolation in the Compound.⁸¹

⁷⁹W. F. Wertheim, *Indonesian Society in Transition, A study of Social Change*, W. Van Hoeve Ltd., The Hague, 1959, p. 73.

⁸⁰*Northern Standard*, 21 October 1932.

⁸¹Darwin Conference, 1930, p. 86.

Assimilation in this case was an enforced policy to be carried out in the absence of their Aboriginal families, in the context of an authoritarian institution. Nevertheless, the union condoned the process on the basis that assimilated women would be more likely to attract higher wages, and thus be less of a threat to unionism.

According to Richard White, the idea of Australia as a worker's paradise 'reinforced discrimination against women, children, non-whites, the unemployed and other sections of the working class, since only the successful, adult, white male fitted the image of the "workingman"'.⁸² What is more disturbing, however, is this attempt by those who strove to create this 'paradise' to mould those around them into their image of the ideal worker, sacrificing individual choice for the sake of unity.

On the other hand, there needs to be some means of distinguishing between the cultural assimilation evident on the football field, as Aboriginal players excelled at an 'Australian' sport, and other forms of official assimilation, enforced through restrictive and repressive institutional measures. On the football field and in the pub, the call was for 'half-castes' to be given equal treatment along with other 'coloured' residents. 'Whiteness' was not the criteria for inclusion in these activities, according to the unionist protesters. From the perspective of the Aboriginal Department, however, basic freedoms such as the right to drink in hotels were only accessible to 'half-castes' who could satisfy their criteria for exemption from the Aboriginal Ordinance. Such an exemption was only possible if 'half-castes' ceased to 'habitually' associate with so-called 'full-blood' Aborigines. The law explicitly enforced segregation from their Aboriginal people, before allowing integration with the 'white' community. 'Half-caste' workers were left to negotiate their way between these two paths, always aware of their precarious position, but bolstered by the support they received from the NAWU.

This debate over the status of Aboriginal people was taking place, not merely in Darwin, but all over Australia. The formation of the Darwin Half-Caste Association in 1936 has obvious parallels with the 1937 formation of the Aborigines Progressive Association in Sydney, and the Victoria-based Australian Aborigines' League. According to Russell McGregor, both associations accepted assimilation ideology, asking for 'the same political rights and social services as our white fellow Australians'.⁸³ William

⁸²Richard White, *Inventing Australia, Images and Identity 1688-1980*, Allen & Unwin, 1981, p. 46.

⁸³Russell McGregor, 'Protest and Progress: Aboriginal Activism in the 1930s', *Australian Historical Studies*, Volume 25, October 1993, no. 101, p. 556.

Cooper, secretary of the Australian Aborigines' League, asked for legislation 'granting full rights to aborigines', but only to those 'who have attained civilised status'.⁸⁴ He wrote: We do not want our people to remain primitive, uncultured and a prey to all comers. Why should we remain in the near Stone Age?⁸⁵ William Ferguson, secretary of the Aborigines Progressive League, asked for citizenship, not for 'wild aborigines, but for 'educated aborigines'.⁸⁶ On the other, hand, unlike the 'Half-Caste Association', Cooper rejected distinctions on the basis of descent, which separated 'half-caste' from 'full-blood'. Cooper wrote: 'Let the determination be, not color, but capacity'.⁸⁷

It is not apparent that this same rejection of 'caste' had saliency in Darwin. The divide between 'half-caste' and 'full-blood' was enshrined in legislation, in union policy and in daily social practices. On the other hand, unlike Sydney and Melbourne, contact with 'traditional' Aboriginal cultures was a part of daily life. Nor was it possible to apply abstract divisions between 'wild' and 'educated' Aborigines. The servants discussed in the previous chapter lived in both worlds, adapting to white ways, and then returning home to their people. Nevertheless, their official status as Aboriginal meant that unlike the 'half-caste' watersiders, they were not offered any form of equality with whites, either in wages or in citizenship rights. It was not until the Commonwealth government announced its New Deal in 1939 that policy considered the eventual inclusion of Aboriginal people as citizens.⁸⁸

Conclusion

By the 1930s, the 'half-caste' watersiders came to be accepted as full union members within the NAWU. While Darwin's elite 'white' society continued to favour social segregation, unionists were more inclined towards integration. The trend towards cultural assimilation was reflected in the social life of working-class Darwin, where the 'local coloured lads' were regarded as an integral part of their community. Within the largely masculine cultural milieu of unionism, the participation of 'half-caste' waterside workers in what were regarded as typically 'Australian' activities such as Australian Rules football, contributed to their acceptance as union

⁸⁴*Ibid.*

⁸⁵Written in 1937, cited in *Ibid.*, p. 557.

⁸⁶*Ibid.*, p. 556.

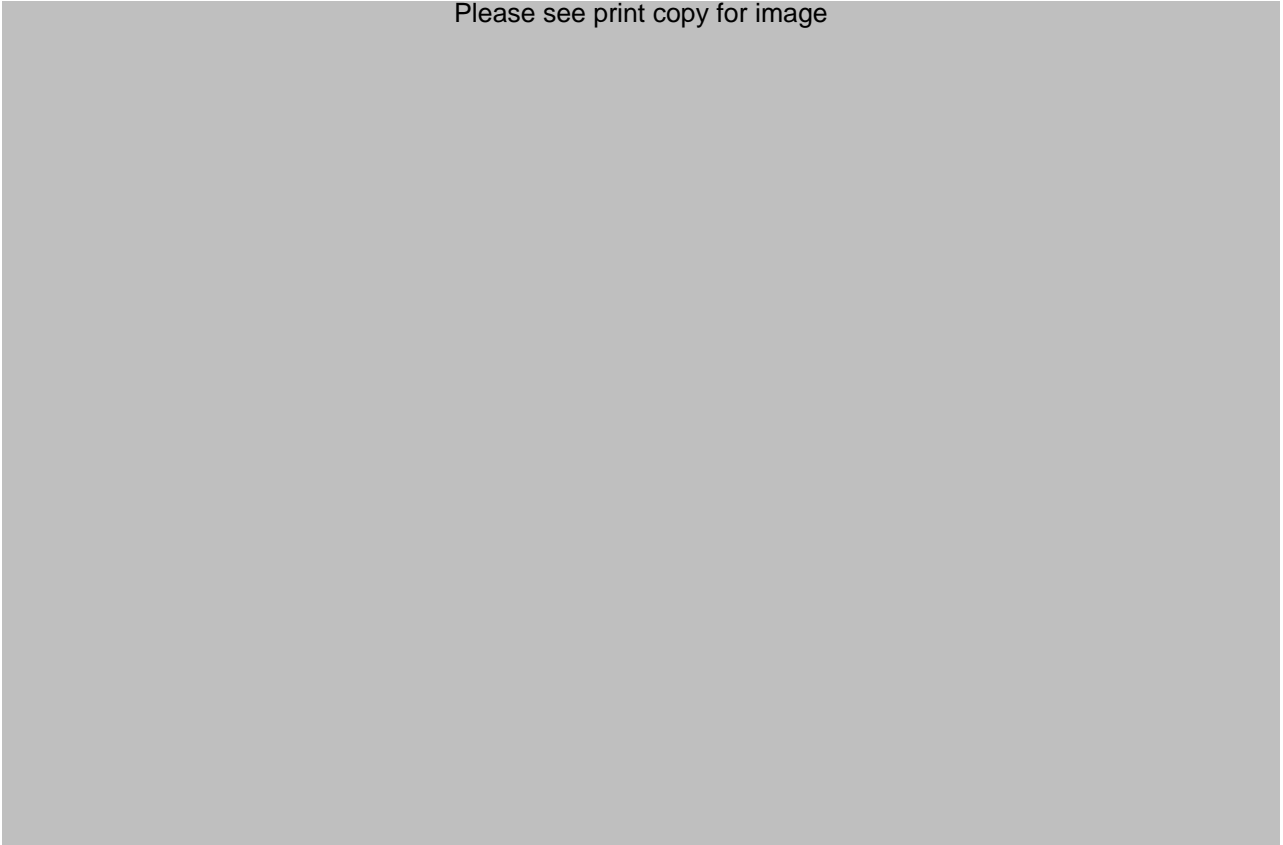
⁸⁷*Ibid.*, p. 564.

⁸⁸Julie Wells, *The Long March: Assimilation Policy and Practice in Darwin, the Northern Territory, 1939-1967*, Ph.D. thesis, University of Queensland, 1995, p. 51.

members. Against a backdrop of administrative repression, the NAWU came to be regarded as the strongest allies for 'half-castes' struggling to obtain basic personal freedoms.

Japanese arrive at Darwin with pearl-shell from N. of Australia.
(Gilruth Family Collection, 1912-1919, NTRS 234 CP 881-886, Item 24,
Northern Territory Archives Service)

Please see print copy for image



Chapter eight

Pearlers' coolies?

This chapter examines the employment of indentured pearling crew in Darwin focusing on the 1920s and 30s. These men were brought to Australia from Japan, Singapore and various islands in the Dutch East Indies, including Sabu, Timor and Aru Islands. The employment of indentured 'coloured' labour in the pearling industry was clearly contrary to the White Australia project. Unlike the case of Aboriginal servants, the pearling industry's use of 'coloured' labour provoked a strong response from the Fisher Labor government and continued protest from Darwin's NAWU. Nevertheless, union response to the perceived threat of 'competition' from these workers was mitigated by the unionist activities of the pearling crews themselves. The presence of Asian indentured labour in Darwin gave the NAWU a greater awareness of international labour movements than they might otherwise have had. This chapter considers not only issues of employment, but as with the previous chapter, broader questions of social segregation and inclusion, particularly of Japanese and 'Malay' workers within Darwin's multi-ethnic working class community. While acknowledging the restrictions of White Australian legislation, this chapter also points to examples of inter-ethnic relations which might best be described as early examples of spontaneous multiculturalism.

Exemption from White Australia

When the White Australia policy was first implemented by the federal government in 1901, the pearl-shelling industry was exempt from the provisions of the *Immigration Restriction Act*, making it the only industry to be allowed indentured 'coloured' labour in Australia.¹ Under the Fisher Labor government, however, this exemption was revoked. New legislation decreed that no licences would be issued after December 1912, unless both

¹Lorraine Philipps, 'Plenty More Little Brown Man! Pearlshelling and White Australia in Queensland 1901-1918', in E. L. Wheelwright and K. Buckley (eds.), *Essays in the Political Economy of Australian Capitalism*, Volume 4, Australia & New Zealand Book Company, Sydney, 1980, p. 58.

the divers and tenders were European.² After protests from the pearling industry, extensions were granted and Fisher appointed a commission headed by F. W. Bamford to investigate. Although the commission began with the intention of supporting white labour, in 1913 the Liberal government appointed new commissioners and by the final report in 1916 they came down in favour of continued indentured labour.³ The 1916 report concluded that the pearl-shell industry was not suitable for white divers, stating:

The life is not a desirable one, and the risks are great, as proved by the abnormal death rate amongst divers and try divers. The work is arduous, the hours long, and the remuneration quite inadequate. Living space is cramped, the food wholly preserved of its different kinds, and the life incompatible with that a European worker is entitled to live.⁴

J. S. Bach, writing in 1956, argued that by continuing to allow 'coolie' labour the federal government had undermined the moral authority of White Australia.⁵ Lorraine Philipps, however, believed that the 'moral authority' of the policy had never included 'coloured' workers. The decision to exempt the pearling industry was entirely in keeping with White Australian objectives, to avoid 'racial contamination' from close association with 'coloured' crews, and to preserve white working conditions.⁶

The supporters of indentured labour argued that there was little danger of 'racial contamination' as the pearling crews spent little time on shore and repatriation would prevent them from becoming permanent residents.⁷ Even Labor Senator Staniforth Smith had argued that White Australia would 'not be endangered by the employment of coloured crews on the pearling fleets; provided the Acts and regulations in existence are firmly and strictly administered'.⁸ Philipps argued that the controls built into the system prevented Asians from competing with white workers in

²Lenore Layman, ' "To Keep up the Australian Standard": Regulating contract labour migration, 1901-50', *Labour History*, no. 70, May 1996, p. 41; Andrew Markus, *Australian Race Relations, 1788-1993*. Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1994, p. 124.

³Philipps, 'Plenty More Little Brown Man!', pp. 73-5.

⁴Bamford, Final Report, 1916, cited in Regina Ganter, *The Pearl-Shellers of Torres Strait. Resource Use, Development and Decline, 1860s-1960s*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, 1994, p. 114; See also, 'Pearling Conditions', A1/15 1914/12612, National Archives of Australia ACT (AA ACT)

⁵Bach cited in Ganter, *The Pearl-Shellers*, p. 115.

⁶Philipps, p. 67.

⁷*Ibid.*, p. 62.

⁸*Ibid.*, p. 73.

other fields and imposed 'stringent conditions of segregation and repatriation' to ensure the least possible danger from 'racial contamination'.⁹

Another point of debate was the perception that white workers were inherently incapable of diving for shell. Giving evidence to the pearling Commission in Western Australia, Captain Dalziel argued against the use of white divers, stating that

the importation of white divers was proved a complete failure. Within four months two had been paralysed, and the monotony of confinement upon the pearling luggers for months had proved too much for others and they had left. White divers also disliked the risks involved in working in deep water. Few men appreciated these risks more than the Japanese. But the Japanese were fatalists and were willing to face the risk provided shell could be obtained. There was not a chance, in his opinion, of carrying on the pearling industry successfully with white divers.¹⁰

Another 1904 report argued that the risk to life and poor conditions were such that no remuneration could be regarded as sufficient.¹¹

Regina Ganter argued that the exemption was ultimately a concession to the pearl-shellers, who had threatened to leave Australia if they were denied access to Japanese divers. Clark, who had already moved a large fleet in 1905 from Thursday Island to the Dutch East Indies had amply demonstrated that this was a very real threat.¹²

Clearly a number of factors contributed to the decision to continue employing indentured labour, but underlying all of these was the assumption that white divers were inherently different from Japanese divers. The Japanese were deemed to be more skilled, more motivated, able to cope with poor working conditions, and ultimately more dispensable than white workers. Having acknowledged the sub-standard working conditions, the decision to continue amounted to an admission that White Australia still condoned the colonial practice of maintaining 'coloured' workers as a separate and exploitable workforce. Apparently such moral considerations became less important to the federal government when the work was performed off shore, where White Australia's 'racial' purity was not at risk.

⁹*Ibid.*, p. 80.

¹⁰'White Divers a failure', *Northern Territory Times*, 20 April 1916.

¹¹Phillips, 'Plenty More Little Brown Man!', p. 67.

¹²Ganter, *The Pearl-Shellers*, p. 115; Phillips, 'Plenty More Little Brown Man!', pp. 62 and 64.

This chapter, however, is not so much concerned with official motives as with local reactions. The decision to maintain an indentured workforce in Darwin had important ramifications for the town, confirming its multi-ethnic character with fresh intakes of 'alien' workers who were by definition, outsiders in White Australia.

Pearling in Port Darwin

Mother-of-pearl shell was first discovered in Port Darwin harbour in 1884, prompting a rush of pearling boats from the Torres Straits. The muddiness of the water, however, prevented the divers from working satisfactorily and the industry was abandoned within three years.¹³ The industry revived however, and in 1902 when Government Resident Dashwood made his report, the pearling industry in Port Darwin was thriving.¹⁴ Darwin pearling masters, like those in Broome and Thursday Island, were adamant that 'coloured' labour was necessary. A. E. Jolly, the owner of seventeen luggers, relied solely on 'coloured' labour. He told Dashwood that:

The Japanese are by far the best divers. They are temperate. Manilamen drink. The Chinese are not good sailors. We only take Chinese if we cannot get others.¹⁵

Jolly argued that white divers were incapable of performing the task. He threatened to abandon the industry if he were forced to use white labour. Another Darwin pearler, Henry Charles Edwards, who owned thirteen luggers, similarly argued in favour of Japanese divers, claiming that they had superior eyesight for finding shell.¹⁶

In the early days of Darwin pearling, Filipinos, sometimes referred to as Manilamen, were employed. After Federation, however, very few indentured Filipinos were brought into Australia. By the late 1920s, those Filipinos left in the industry tended to be older, long-term residents who had given up diving and taken on shore work. Having arrived in Australia before 1901, they were described as 'free men' and permitted to stay as permanent residents.¹⁷ Chinese were rarely employed on luggers and after

¹³M. Stanley, Inspector of Fisheries and Chief Pearling Inspector, Report on the Administration of the Northern Territory for the year ended 30th of July 1932, *CPP*, 1932.

¹⁴Douglas Lockwood, *The Front Door, Darwin 1869-1969*, Rigby, Adelaide, 1968, p. 126.

¹⁵*Ibid.*

¹⁶*Ibid.*, p. 127.

¹⁷K. Nylander to Inspector of Police, 17 December 1938, F1 1938/726, National Archives of Australia, Northern Territory (AA NT).

1920 there were virtually no Chinese employed in the industry.¹⁸ The favoured ethnic groups were Japanese as divers, tenders and engineers, and Malay and Koepangers as crew. In addition, pearling captains took on casual Aboriginal labour once they had cleared Darwin harbour and were closer to the pearling beds. By 1911 when the Commonwealth took over the Northern Territory, there were 31 boats in service employing 138 men. Of those 120 were indentured under permit from the Minister for External Affairs and the rest were 'Asiatic' residents of Darwin.¹⁹ The male population of Darwin at the time included a number of ethnic groups who were likely to have engaged in pearling. There were 77 Japanese, 52 Filipinos, 49 Timorese, 21 Malays, seven Javanese, four Siamese, five Cingalese, and five South Sea Islanders.²⁰

Elsie Masson, who lived briefly in Government House in Darwin, described the working conditions for pearlers in 1914. She wrote:

The life of the pearler is not an unhappy one. There is, of course, the risk of death, or — still more common — of paralysis, which very frequently overtakes the diver after some years. To make up for this, the work is not heavy and the wages are high. The diver is paid according to the weight of his catch, while each of the other men earns from £5 to £6 a month, and provisions are free. There are five men on each lugger — the diver, the tender, who manages the life-lines, and three others to help work the ship, one of whom is generally training to become a diver himself. Their food and other supplies consist of rice, flour, dripping, jam, kerosene, candles, tea, coffee, and hops. ... To add zest to life, there is intense rivalry between the divers, each one endeavouring to outdo the others in the amount of shell his lugger brings back.²¹

According to the 1911 Annual Report, divers were paid one shilling per month and £23 per ton of shell, tenders, £4 per month, cooks £10 per month and crews on pearling boats, £2 10s per month.²²

After World War One, the pearling industry in Darwin dwindled, and by 1923 there were only two boats employing four Japanese and eight Aboriginal crew. It was not until 1925, when Victor Clark decided to bring

¹⁸Returns of persons engaged in Pearling Industry, Years 1931-39, A433/1 49/2/6961, AA ACT.

¹⁹Report of the Administrator for the year 1911, p. 54.

²⁰Census figures for Darwin, 5 mile radius, A1/15 11/16191, AA ACT.

²¹Elsie Masson, *An Untamed Territory*, Macmillan and Co., London, 1915, pp. 53-4.

²²Report of the Administrator, 1911, p. 56.

three luggers from Broome, that the industry began to revive. It is this later period that will serve as the focus of this chapter.

Regulating indentured work after 1925

In 1925, the federal government sent the Sub-Collector of Customs in Darwin instructions for dealing with the employment of indentured labour.²³ The degree of red-tape associated with the industry was an indication that the government intended to keep a close watch on the indentured workers, assuring themselves that everything was being done to safeguard White Australia.²⁴ Pearling Masters were obliged to buy permits and to pay a bond for each indentured worker. The bond was £250 for up to 10 men and could be returned only after the indent was back in his country of origin. Each indent was required to have a medical certificate and a identity card with two thumbprints and two photographs. These regulations addressed two of the preoccupations of White Australia — that immigrants might introduce contagious diseases to Australia and that they might attempt to remain as permanent residents.

The period of engagement was, in practice, much longer than regulations suggested. During the first three years if indents wished to change employers they were required to have the permission of their former employer. After six years, however the original employer would no longer have any special claim to their services. Many indents remained in Australia for all of their adult working lives. Registers were kept detailing date of employment, number and nationality of indents, deaths and causes, and prosecutions and the offence. These were intended to monitor and protect the working conditions of the indents — White Australia was concerned to avoid any suggestion of forced or exploitative labour conditions. The recording of prosecutions, however, was designed to protect the interests of the white community. At the first sign of 'racial' conflict or 'undisciplined' behaviour, the government could order the repatriation of the indents in question.

In order to prevent any competition with white workers, indents, who lived ashore for several months in the lay-up season, were permitted to engage only in work connected with their luggers, such as overhauling and painting. A final regulation, which was designed to control Japanese

²³F. J. Quinlan to Sub-Collector of Customs, Darwin, 31 August 1925, A1/15 30/880, AA ACT.

²⁴J. P. S. Bach, 'The Pearlshelling Industry and the "White Australia" Policy', *Historical Studies*, Volume 10 (38), May 1962, p. 212.

monopoly over the industry was that not more than five men of the same nationality were permitted on the one lugger.²⁵ Thus, even though the pearling industry was officially exempted from the White Australia policy, the regulations were clearly formulated with the primary concerns of White Australia in mind.

Union responses to 'competition'

From the perspective of Darwin's NAWU, the presence of indentured pearling crews continued to be regarded as problematic. Quinlan and Lever-Tracy, in their study of union responses to Asian workers, outlined three possible union reactions: *solidarity*, where they would be welcomed by the union; *segregation*, where they would be corralled in a limited range of undesirable jobs; or total *exclusion* from the labour market or country.²⁶ The third option was the basis for the White Australia policy. The pearling industry represented the second option. It remained to be seen if unions would develop any sense of solidarity through close contact with Asian workers. Andrew Markus has suggested that pearling crews were not regarded as a threat, either to white working conditions, or to white communities. If this were the case then there would be little reason for antagonism between the NAWU and the indentured pearling crews. In fact, however, the NAWU continued to regard the indentured workers as a possible threat to white working opportunities.

In 1928, as unemployment increased, and the pearling industry expanded, NAWU officials turned their attention to the employment of indentured pearling crews on shore. The Pearling Ordinance stated that:

During the layup season the men may live ashore and engage in such work as is ordinarily connected with the boats at that period, such as overhauling, painting, repairing, refitting, etc. but they are not to be allowed to engage in other occupations on shore.²⁷

Nevertheless, indentured crews were employed in other jobs such as unloading, weighing, sorting and packing shell. Over the next ten years the

²⁵Six were permitted if there were two divers. Instructions Regarding Employment of coloured indentured labour in the Pearling Industry, 1925, A1/15 30/880, AA ACT.

²⁶Michael Quinlan and Constance Lever-Tracy, 'From Labor Market Exclusion to Industrial Solidarity: Australian Trade Union Responses to Asian Workers, 1930-1988' in M. Easson (ed.), *Australia and Immigration: able to grow?*, Pluto Press and Labour Council of NSW, Sydney, 1990, p. 20.

²⁷Memorandum from Sub-Collector of Customs, Darwin to Department of Home and Territories, Canberra, 29 October 1928, A1/15 30/880, AA ACT.

NAWU noted every incident of illicit employment of indentured crew and accused the government of not taking steps to uphold the White Australia policy.²⁸

In January 1930, Robert Toupein, secretary of the NAWU, sent the Minister a list of jobs which he argued should be reserved for white labour. He included chipping, shell-packing, box-making, loading and unloading shell, and cutting timber. He further suggested that such restrictions should be enforced by the 'immediate deportation of the labourer' and a penalty upon the Master Pearler if the latter was the offender.²⁹ The NAWU may have regarded the indentured crews as 'cheap' competition, but their antagonism was mostly directed at the Pearling Masters who employed the labour. Their White Australian stance was couched in terms of class solidarity despite the fact that they were primarily concerned to find employment for white workers in a limited labour market.

The tone of union attitudes can be gauged by this 1934 letter to the *Northern Standard*:

These Darwin pearlers seem to be on a great wicket. They are allowed what no other industry is: Indentured coolie labour — in a country that boasts of its White Australia policy. If any of their coolie workers refuse work all the master pearler has to do is to inform the Customs Department and they do the rest — jail him at the taxpayers' expense.³⁰

During this period, I know of no case of indentured workers being jailed for refusing to work. The question which arises from this type of rhetoric, is whether their alleged sympathy for 'coolie workers' was genuine internationalism or an expression of competitive racism.³¹ I would argue, that while unionists continued to describe indentured workers as 'coolies', a term which implies 'racial' stereotyping, they were still far from expressing solidarity.

The NAWU liked to portray itself as the protector of Malay indents, though how genuine their concern was it open to debate. In 1936 the Secretary of the NAWU, J. A. McDonald wrote regarding shore work:

²⁸Clifford Pierce, Sub-Collector of Customs, Darwin, to Department of Home and Territories, 29 October 1928, A1/15 30/880, AA ACT.

²⁹Toupein to Minister of Home Affairs, 11 January 1930, A1/15 30/880.

³⁰'Boko' writing in *Northern Standard*, 13 February 1934.

³¹For a discussion of competitive racism see van den Berghe, P., *Race and Ethnicity: Essays in Comparative Sociology*, Basic Books, New York, 1970, pp. 26-7.

The men used are mostly Malays, and it may be said in passing, that they are used for shore work, very much against their will. When they join a pearling lugger, their wages are fixed at 25/- per month, and they are given to understand that they have only to work on the boat. They are told that the Australian law does not allow them to work on shore, but they are soon disillusioned when the boat reaches Darwin. Under threats of being sent to Fanny Bay gaol, they are compelled to load the shell on to lorries, and unload it when they reach the sheds.

McDonald described them as 'sweated alien labour' and commented that 'This is taking place in a country that prides itself on its "White Australia Policy."³² On the other hand, McDonald acknowledged that this was not the fault of the Malays, writing: 'They know that they are being exploited and have no other way of seeking redress.'³³ What is puzzling in this is that according to the government regulations, pearling crew were paid £4 per month and keep, plus a bonus according to the amount of shell brought in. These wages were not high but in Darwin, where unemployment was high they were quite reasonable.³⁴

The communist members of the NAWU were no different in their representations of Malay workers. In an 1930 article in the *Workers' Weekly*, a correspondent remarked that:

These indentured laborers are compelled to work under coolie conditions and are bound to the pearling masters in a manner similar to slaves. A young Malay worker who decided to have a day away from work was fined £3/15/ for refusing to work ...³⁵

This stereotyping of Malay workers as 'slaves' or 'coolies' was a device employed by both Labor and communist unionists. In fairness, it should be noted that their hands were tied. The indents were under government regulations and were thus beyond the control of the union. Even if the NAWU membership rules had allowed 'coloured alien' membership, their

³²McDonald, 'Indentured Labor in Darwin, White Australia Policy Flouted', *Northern Standard*, 24 January 1936.

³³*Ibid.*

³⁴Conditions of agreement between Master Pearlmen and Pearlfishers in Darwin, Northern Territory, 1936, F1 1938/540, AA NT.

³⁵M. (possibly Mahoney), 'Indentured Slaves in Darwin', *Workers' Weekly*, 10 January 1930, p. 4.

status as 'indents' would have prevented them from becoming members. In this sense the indents were in a similar position to Aboriginal servants who were similarly constrained by government regulations.

In 1933 it was suggested that local labour might be employed as crew on the pearling luggers. The response of Stanley, Chief Pearling Inspector was antagonistic. He wrote:

Most of the unemployed are imbued with Communistic or Socialistic ideas, having had a generous education from the exponents of these beliefs in Darwin. If they are not so imbued they are at least rabid Unionists, and none of these beliefs are compatible with efficiency and commercial prosperity in the Pearling Industry. On the pearling vessels work begins at 5 a.m. and ceases at 10 p.m. or later. ... The Asiatics live almost exclusively on a diet of rice, eked out with fish, Chinese 'Soy' and the Miso bean. A new scale of diet would have to be provided for Europeans.³⁶

Stanley echoed the sentiments of the 1916 Royal Commission. He assumed that white workers would not be engaged to dive, and that they were being taken on as crew members.³⁷ This, he argued would have put them in a position of subservience to the Japanese diver, and he feared that 'racial antipathy ... would result in friction'. He wrote:

A Japanese diver, whose very life depends on the efficiency of his tender (whose duty it is to attend to the air supply and life lines), has no confidence in the ability of members of another coloured race, and he would have less confidence in a European.³⁸

The NAWU did not pursue this avenue of employment, concentrating instead on limiting the employment of indentured workers on shore.

In February 1936, as a result of union protest, it was proposed that pearl-shell would be taken to the jetty and 'handled by white labour'.³⁹ In spite of this, in 1938, when Captain Parnell seized a Japanese lugger allegedly fishing illegally in Australian waters, he asked for four Aboriginal workers

³⁶Stanley, Chief Pearling Inspector to Administrator, 31 March 1933, A1/15 33/2419, AA ACT.

³⁷J. B. Carpenter attempted to introduce white divers in 1936, but the experiments were deemed unsatisfactory. New suits were tested by the Austral Diving and Pearling Company. Divers Paralysis', *Northern Standard*, 2 June 1936; 'White Divers for Pearling Industry', *Northern Standard*, 29 May 1936.

³⁸Stanley, Chief Pearling Inspector to Administrator, 31 March 1933, A1/15 33/2419, AA ACT.

³⁹See Chapter Seven, regarding the use of the word 'white' for the waterside workers. 'Union Notes', *Northern Standard*, 28 February 1936.

from the new Compound to help with landing of shell. Parnell had to be reminded that this was now the jurisdiction of the local unemployed on relief work.⁴⁰

The Pearling Ordinance of 1936 attempted to extend the limitation on shore work, but an exception was made where there was no suitable (skilled or experienced) labour available.⁴¹ For example, the job of sorting out the shell into its various grades, ready for the international market was one which required experience. In contrast, packing of shell was classified as unskilled. The effect of the new Pearling Ordinance was to allow skilled tasks to be performed by indentured workers while reserving unskilled jobs for white workers.

According to Lenore Layman, the Contract Immigrants Act of 1905, which allowed for skilled indentured labour, did not include the pearling industry. 'Asiatic' divers were not regarded as skilled so much as possessing an innate faculty for finding shell. There were other workers in the pearling industry, however, who were employed purely for their skill, including Filipino shell-sorters and Japanese carpenters (shipwrights). These workers defied the White Australian regulations in that they were permitted to live ashore, close to the white community, throughout the year.⁴²

The employment of white workers as casual unskilled labour for the industry was supported by the union, but discouraged by the Pearling Masters. McDonald wrote in 1936:

At the present time there are 48 men registered as unemployed in this office. Many are returned soldiers, and quite a number have had experience in handling shell, and making cases. ... Will you be good enough to give me an early reply on the above matter, as it may prevent a very ugly situation arising.⁴³

In response, Master Pearler, Clark was quick to discredit union workers, writing:

⁴⁰L. Parnell, NT Patrol Service to Acting Government Secretary, 20 January 1938; Nylander to Works Director, Department of the Interior, 20 January 1938; E. W. Stoddart, Works Director to Government Secretary, 27 January 1938, F1 1938/455, AA NT.

⁴¹*Pearling Ordinance 1936*, F1 1936/220, AA NT.

⁴²Both carpenter, Tomitaro Uemura and camp head, Antonio Custodio, working for Territory Pearling Company, resided permanently at the camp in Darwin, Frances Bay. See 'Assault in Pearling Camp, Japanese Attacks Filipino, Clash of Languages', *Northern Standard*, 23 October 1936.

⁴³J. McDonald, NAWU to T. Paterson, Minister for the Interior, 20 January 1936, A1/15 36/1629, AA ACT; see also the following year, J. A. McDonald to T. Paterson, Minister for the Interior, 22 January 1937, F1 1938/642, AA NT.

McDonald came to me and told me he had 3 skilled packers and asked me to employ same. I told him I would be extremely glad to do so and that they could start the next day. Next morning two only turned up neither of whom could pack shell. ... one chap after trying for about an hour told me, that this sort of work was no good to him — put on his hat and cleared out. The other chap kept on, I continually assisting him, and at the end of a few days was earning up to 35/- per day ... He continued for a couple of weeks until his money became a burden to him and he went on the drink. In the meantime I picked up two young white fellows and a local coloured lad and taught them to pack and they have continued since.⁴⁴

Clearly the relationship between McDonald and the Pearlers was one of barely-restrained hostility. The hostility, however, did not centre on the issue of 'coloured' labour. It would be wrong to view this simply as an issue of racial prejudice. The antagonism they display is far more concerned with the struggle between labour and capital and conflicting representations of union workers.

Another aspect of the pearling work which the NAWU attempted to take over was the weighing of pearl shell after it had been unloaded from the luggers. Captain Gregory protested to the Chief Pearling Inspector, Karl Nylander, that

everyone in the boat, except the actual crew, that is divers, tenders and engineers, are interested in the weight of shell delivered, they being paid either at a rate per ton or a bonus on a quantity of shell delivered, and, as previously stated, they consider that the end of their work is to land, weigh and stack the shell. It then goes into the hands of local labour who open it up, sort, pack and ship same.⁴⁵

Nylander passed on the message to Canberra. He was fully aware that the divers had a vested interest in the task of weighing. He observed that:

⁴⁴The 'local coloured lad' Clark referred to would have been categorised as a 'half-caste' and therefore eligible for union membership and unemployment relief work. J. Clark, Pearler, Darwin, to Sub-Collector of Customs, 28 January 1936, A1/15 36/1629, AA ACT.

⁴⁵Gregory and Co. to Chief Pearling Inspector, 4 May 1937, F1 1938/402, AA NT. Note that Nylander was a Russian of Swedish extraction, born in the Baltic Provinces in 1876 and had arrived in Darwin in 1912. A1/15 1915/10445, AA ACT.

The Oriental element regarded the delivery and weighing of the product fished by them with a certain suspicion. The take is, under agreement, reduced by 5% discards, and the weighing was closely followed in order that not a pound of weight be lost sight of.⁴⁶

Whereas the union depicted the unloading and weighing as tasks which the indents were **forced** to perform, the Pearlers insisted that the men willingly performed this task.

The difficulty in assessing this evidence is that both McDonald and Gregory were white men, with a vested interest in distorting the truth, and both claimed to represent the best interests of the indentured crews. Without access to the indentured workers' perspective we can only guess at their view. Gregory's point, that they were interested in the weighing process, was clearly valid. Canberra decreed that the Ordinance could not be changed — that weighing was not within the scope of indentured workers. To assuage Japanese fears, they suggested that the indents have a representative present to supervise the weighing and so safeguard their interests.⁴⁷ The image of white workers performing manual labour while being supervised by Japanese workers has a certain charm as it neatly subverts the colonial stereotype.

Queensland and Western Australia

Thursday Island, Queensland's major pearling centre, was quite different from Darwin in that it did not have such a powerful union movement. There, the work of sorting and packing pearlshell was done by Malays or Papuans.⁴⁸ A 1930 report stated:

Local European labourers do not want this class of work. I think, however, that the rapidly increasing half-caste population should get a chance to learn this class of work; they are suitable and preferable to the Malays who are indolent and who, in nearly every case, are living clandestinely with coloured women. In this connection a good deal of criticism is levelled at the Department, and I would request

⁴⁶Nylander, Chief Pearling Inspector to Administrator, 7 August 1937, F1 1938/402, AA NT.

⁴⁷J. A. Carrodus to Administrator, 9 September 1937, F1 1938/402, AA NT.

⁴⁸Memorandum, Department for Home and Territories, 'Employment of Indentured Labourers on Shore at Thursday Island', A1/15 30/880, AA ACT.

early consideration of this matter with a view to confining the Malays solely to work on the ketches.⁴⁹

This departmental memo went directly against the White Australian ethos espoused by the NAWU. The writer reflects the colonial mentality, stereotyping the Malay worker as 'indolent'. Furthermore, the proposal to replace Malays with 'half-caste' workers would have simply replaced one 'coloured' worker with another, both being categorised as 'cheap' labour. In any case, such a proposal would not have been possible in Darwin where 'half-castes' were union members and thus included in the same category as white workers.⁵⁰

This report highlights the notion that pearling was inherently regarded as 'coloured' work and therefore unsuitable for white workers. The Queensland sugar industry had similarly been regarded as the domain of 'coloured' workers. In order to persuade white workers to take on the work, the government had been forced, not only to increase their wages, but also to remove or segregate 'coloured' workers. Those white workers who demonstrated overt racism refused to work alongside 'coloured' workers, and were sensitive to the suggestion that they were performing 'coolie' labour.⁵¹ In Darwin, however, as was discussed in chapter seven, there was little evidence that 'white' workers after the 1920s were hesitant to work alongside 'coloured' workers. It is possible, of course, that this apparent contrast with Queensland is the result of focusing on the worst cases of segregationism in Queensland. Given the prevalence of communist unionism in that state it is likely that some degree of solidarity existed between white and 'coloured' workers.⁵²

The situation in Broome was apparently more in line with that of Darwin. In Broome, pearl-shell was packed by local labour, at a rate of £5/10/- per ton and this work was supervised by a local European. The report does not actually specify that the 'local labour' was white labour. Broome, like Darwin would have had a large proportion of local 'coloured' labour in need of work. Unfortunately, studies of this aspect of unionism

⁴⁹*Ibid.*

⁵⁰There was some union protest in Thursday Island from the Waterside Workers, but further research would be required to confirm the strength and nature of that protest. See Ganter, *The Pearl-Shellers*, p. 112.

⁵¹Kay Saunders, 'Masters and Servants', in *Who Are Our Enemies?, Racism and the Australian Working Class*, Hale and Iremonger, ASSH, Sydney, 1978, pp. 99-100.

⁵²See Diane Menghetti, *The Red North; the Popular Front in North Queensland*, James Cook University, Townsville, 1981.

have not yet been undertaken in either Thursday Island or Broome so further comparison is not possible.⁵³

Japanese unionism

One of the key assumptions of the White Australia policy was that Asian workers were a threat to the Australian labour movement because they were willing to work long hours for low wages. The image of the Asian 'coolie' was juxtaposed against the image of the white unionist. How then did the union react to the presence of Japanese unionism in Darwin? Curiously, few historians have paid attention to the strength of Japanese unionism. Lorraine Philipps, for example, despite acknowledging that the Japanese were prepared to strike for higher wages in the first decade of the twentieth century does not applaud nor discuss their unionism. The overall tone of her article, subtitled, "Plenty More Little Brown Man!", tends to support the stereotype of 'cheap' indentured labour, a stereotype which gives tacit support to the White Australian project.⁵⁴ Regina Ganter's *The Pearls of Torres Strait*, on the other hand gave detailed accounts of Japanese working conditions and organisation. Her analysis, however, did not dwell on the implications of this organisation in regard to white unionist responses.⁵⁵

The Darwin newspapers rarely stereotyped Japanese workers as 'coolies'. The *Northern Territory Times*, in 1917 used the *Jiji Shimpō*, from Tokyo as a source of worker news from Japan.⁵⁶ When the union paper, the *Northern Standard*, began in 1921 it followed that tradition. A 1922 article described the progress of Japan's labour movement, stating:

The growing spirit of independence among wage-earners in the Far East is indicated by the action of 2000 Japanese women who struck work two months ago at the Sugami Spinning Company's factory because of the threatened dismissal of a foreman...⁵⁷

⁵³According to Margo Beasley, Broome did not have a branch of the Waterside Workers' Federation, and wharf work was organised by the Australian Workers' Union. *Wharfies, The History of the Waterside Workers' Federation*, Halstead Press, Rushcutters Bay, 1996, p. 172.

⁵⁴Philipps, 'Plenty More Little Brown Man!'

⁵⁵According to Mary Albertus Bain, in Broome in 1920 there were a group of Japanese pearlers who had formed a break-away union, described by Captain A. C. Gregory of Bolsheviks. Bain suggested that they may have been Yakuza. *Full Fathom Five*, Artlook Books, Perth, 1982, p. 312.

⁵⁶'Ten Health Commandments', *Northern Territory Times*, 19 July 1917.

⁵⁷*Northern Standard*, 1 August 1922.

These regular snippets of information regarding Japanese workers would have shaped the local reader's opinions, helping them to keep abreast of changes overseas.

The Australian communist party was well aware of Japanese union activities. A 1921 article described an Australian attending a Japanese trades union meeting. The person wrote:

Because of our white Australia policy, because of our boast of our liberties, freedom, and democracy, we imagine that the workers of other countries, especially Asiatic workers, are absolutely ignorant, have no organisations, hold no meetings, and in short are simply slaves, far from being even human beings.⁵⁸

Describing the meeting with some enthusiasm, he suggested that Australia could learn about the 'Labor Movement' from the Japanese. The *Northern Standard* gave a similar message. An article, 'Workers' Education in Japan' described the establishment of a workers' education institute in Tokyo with 160 students aged from 19 to 60. The subjects taught included the theory and history of trade unionism, industrial politics and factory management.⁵⁹

As for the local Japanese divers, their image was the antithesis of the 'coolie'. In 1928, when several luggers transferred from Broome to Darwin the wages for skilled divers were extraordinarily high. In Broome most divers had been operating under a system known as 'dummying' in which divers were captains of the their own luggers, but officially under a white owner in order to satisfy Western Australian government regulations.⁶⁰ When divers transferred to Darwin, they were officially working for white Pearling Masters, but again they were able to demand high wages. In 1928 divers were paid £100 a ton for shell raised, on the condition that the diver paid for the expenses of the boat after it had been made ready at the beginning of the season. This arrangement effectively made the diver the captain of his lugger with all the control of a partner.

In 1929, in order to entice men from Broome, the Pearlers offered to pay divers £130 per ton for shell. Pearling Master V. R. Kepert complained that these rates would

⁵⁸'At a Japanese Trades Union Meeting', *The Communist*, 22 July 1921.

⁵⁹The school was run by Bunji Suzuki, formerly honorary president of the Yuai Kai, *Northern Standard*, 20 June 1922.

⁶⁰*Sun*, Sydney, 1 February 1929, A1/15 28/11303, AA ACT.

mean the loss of the white man's profit and the enrichment of the Japs; who in about one or two years at that rate of earning money would retire and leave us without Divers.⁶¹

The divers' share of the profits was very high indeed if one considers that in 1929, the principal New York buyer, Otto Gerdar, was offering £180 per ton for shell.⁶² An estimate of a divers' annual income would be £468 for the year, out of which he would have to feed the crew.⁶³ As a further incentive, the Pearling Masters would pay divers an advance of £100 to £150 at the start of the season. This amount was negotiated and skilled divers could demand higher advances.⁶⁴ Darwin pearlers were offering an extra £30 advance to attract divers.⁶⁵

In 1931, a Japanese Divers' Society and a Divers' Tenders' Society was formed in Darwin. According to the Chief Pearling Inspector, 'the formation of these societies, coupled with the pernicious activities of local communistic agents' had resulted in 'unrest in the pearling industry'.⁶⁶ In 1932 when the divers went on strike, the *Standard* commented:

Some concern was felt that the industry may be imperiled but others in the know declared it was only the annual bluff put up by the divers, who were, of course, out to secure the best possible conditions for themselves.⁶⁷

Wages for Japanese divers, tenders and engine attendants remained high up until the late 1930s. On top of their base wage of £3 per month, divers were paid a bonus of £25 per ton, enabling them to make several hundred pounds per season. Tenders and engine attendants were paid approximately £9 per month and keep.⁶⁸ By the mid 1930s there were also many Japanese-owned luggers operating on the same pearling beds and they were reportedly working for a share of the profits.⁶⁹ The presence of

⁶¹Kept to Department of Home and Territories, 25 January 1929, A1/15 28/11303, AA ACT.

⁶²Price offered by Otto Gerdar Co. A1/15 29/11303, AA ACT; *Herald*, 2 February 1929.

⁶³'Report of the Administrator', CPP, 1928.

⁶⁴Rich(?) Sub-Collector of Customs, Broome to Secretary, Home and Territories Department, 5 February 1929, A1/15 28/11303, AA ACT.

⁶⁵Broome Pearlers Committee to Home and Territories, 21 December 1928, A1/15 28/11303, AA ACT.

⁶⁶Memorandum from Chief Pearling Inspector, Stanley, 12 May 1933, A1/15 35/7697, AA ACT.

⁶⁷*Northern Standard*, 19 February 1932.

⁶⁸The Territory Pearling Co., previously V. J. Clark Ltd., to Chief Pearling Inspector, 3 June 1938, F1 1938/726, AA NT; Conditions of agreement between Master Pearlers and Pearlfishers in Darwin, Northern Territory, 1936, F1 1938/540, AA NT.

⁶⁹J. A. Perkins, Minister for the Interior reporting to Cabinet, 17 February 1933, *Northern Standard*, 10 January 1933, 'The Pearling Industry'. A1/15 33/938, PT2, AA ACT.

Japanese-owned luggers gave the Japanese divers in Australia even more bargaining power. In Broome in 1937 the divers went on strike demanding an advance of £300 on their wages. As the lugger owners were completely dependent on their divers they acceded to their demands.⁷⁰

Japanese unionism was necessarily vigilant as the Pearling Masters of Darwin were not inclined to benevolence. Kepert, who had transferred from Broome to Darwin in 1929, was unhappy at the degree of control which the Japanese divers had over them.⁷¹ He asked the Northern Territory Commission to consider bringing the pearling crew under the Masters & Servants Act as was the case in Western Australia. This would have enabled him to send employees to gaol for 'disobedience and refusal of orders'. He considered this appropriate rather than the current Darwin system whereby they could only fine the employee a day's wages.⁷²

The Japanese International Development Co. in Darwin, which controlled the importation of indentured labour, was obliged to intervene after an incident involving Pearling Master, V. J. Clark. At the end of the pearling season, Clark made arrangements for his Japanese indentured crews to be shipped with deck passages on the s.s. 'Mangola'. The men insisted that they be given second class passages on the s.s. 'Marella'. At that time it was standard practice on Burns Philp steamers to place white passengers in the cabins and 'coloured' passengers on the deck. The dispute was finally resolved by force when the Sub-Collector of Customs had the police deport the Japanese crew. In response, the Japanese labour agents decided to refuse to secure further indentured labour for Clark. As a result, he was forced to apply to the Minister for permission to employ all Malay labour.⁷³

In another case a Japanese worker took his complaint against Clark to the Chief Pearling Inspector, Karl Nylander. Wataro Yamada complained that Clark had had £3 deducted from his wages under the clause which stipulated that crew must pay for willfully damaged goods. A water tank had been ruined by rifle shots but he argued that one of Kepert's men had done the damage. Nylander asked Clark to deposit the £3 with him while he and the police investigated.⁷⁴ It is significant that Yamada was confident to approach Nylander with a complaint against his employer. It suggests a

⁷⁰'Pearling Strike Threatened', *Northern Standard*, 2 February 1937.

⁷¹Kepert at Glenferrie Sanitarium, Leura NSW to Home and Territories 21 January 1929; Quinlan, Ass. Secretary, Home Affairs, to V. R. Kepert Esq., Leura, 25 January 1929, A1/15 28/11303, AA ACT.

⁷²*Ibid.*

⁷³Administration Memorandum, 'Pearling - Employment of Malay Labour', 12 May 1933, A1/15 35/7697, AA ACT.

⁷⁴K. Nylander to Inspector of Police, 17 December 1938, F1 1938/726, AA NT.

certain degree of faith in the administrative system. Certainly Nylander's reports all demonstrate a high degree of concern for the indentured workers.

Japanese unionism was sometimes portrayed as self-serving, and yet it was clear that they believed in the principle of worker solidarity. In 1936, during a strike, they donated £7 to the NAWU. The NAWU responded in the *Standard*, writing:

The best thanks of the Executive and members are extended to the Japanese of Darwin for the assistance given during the recent strike. Although unable to be members of the N.A.W.U. their sympathies were all with the strikers.⁷⁵

Again, in 1936, the *Northern Standard* reported a visit to the NAWU by two Japanese professors of Commerce:

Both gentlemen spoke with a good knowledge of Australian politics, and had many questions to ask regarding the breach that had lately existed in the ranks of the Labour Party. They expressed regret that there was no direct communications between the Labour Party of Australia and that of Japan, as both were doing what they could to bring about a better and a higher standard of living for the workers. ... both gentlemen extended greetings from the workers of Japan, to the industrialists of the Northern Territory.⁷⁶

The following year, the Secretary of the NAWU, J. A. McDonald published the Japanese election results, noting with interest that the Japanese Labour Party had won 19 additional seats.⁷⁷ Whatever preconceptions we may hold as to the isolationism of the Australian labour movement must be tempered by this evidence of NAWU connection with the Japanese unionists.

'Malay' unionism

Unlike the Japanese pearling crews, the Malay crews did not have a strong union of their own. This was not due to lack of numbers — in 1936, when there were 130 Japanese there was 103 Malay indentured workers in Darwin and this does not include the Koepangers who were listed separately. In pre-

⁷⁵*Northern Standard*, 8 September 1936.

⁷⁶*Northern Standard*, 23 June, 1936.

⁷⁷*Northern Standard*, 4 May 1937.

war Darwin, the terms Malay and Koepanger encompassed a number of different ethnic groups including peoples from Singapore, Java, Maluku, Timor and Sulawesi. Most of these areas were within the Dutch East Indies and for this reason the term Dutch Malay was often used. Pearling crews were often employed at the port of Kupang in west Timor. Despite the fact that many came from the nearby islands of Sabu and Roti, the term Koepanger was applied indiscriminately.⁷⁸ Even men who called themselves Dutch Malays from Dobo in the Aru Islands, were often referred to as Koepangers.⁷⁹

In comparison with the Japanese, the Malay and Koepangers were more often represented as 'coolie' labour. Nevertheless, they too engaged in unionist activity. In 1929, two Koepangers, Mateas Lili and Martin Bela, indentured by Master Pearler Clark, were deported from Australia after refusing to work carrying mail and stores to the Cape Don lighthouse.⁸⁰ They argued that they had signed on to engage in the pearling industry and not to carry cargo. They were prosecuted under Section 390 of the Navigation Act and sentenced to 28 days imprisonment. They were released on the recognisances of Don McKinnon, editor of the union's newspaper the *Northern Standard*. Once released, the two Koepangers were living in the camp of Mahoney, a communist unionist in the NAWU. Finally the two were declared 'prohibited immigrants' under the Immigration Restriction Act and deported.

The following year, Clark asked the government for permission to replace his Malay and Koepanger crews with Papuans, arguing that they were regularly employed at Thursday Island. He was refused permission after the Governor at Port Moresby reported that 'not many natives would satisfy the Endemic Diseases Ordinance 1928 as to Malaria Fever'.⁸¹ While it was not stated, one could assume that Clark's motive for this request was that the Koepang crews were no longer sufficiently submissive. Given that this was a time of communist rebellions in the Dutch East Indies, it is possible that he feared an escalation in communist agitation.⁸²

⁷⁸I would like to express my appreciation to Professor James Fox at ANU, who is currently helping me to identify the origins of the crew members who were loosely categorised as Koepangers. The majority appear to have come from Sabu Island which is close to Kupang in Timor and located in between Roti and Sumba Islands in the eastern region of Indonesia.

⁷⁹Gerard Louwrens Tichelman, 'Anthropological Aspects', *The South Moluccas, Rebellious Province or Occupied State*, A. W. Sythoff-Leyden, 1960, p. 191.

⁸⁰Customs and Excise Office, Darwin to Department of Home Affairs, 26 March 1929, A1/15 29/1132, AA ACT.

⁸¹Clifford Green, Sub-Collector of Customs, to Secretary of Home Affairs, 12 June 1929; Government House, Port Moresby to Prime Minister, 7 August 1929, A518/1 J918/3, AA ACT.

⁸²See Harry Benda and Ruth McVey (eds.), *The Communist Uprisings of 1926-1927 in Indonesia: Key Documents*, Modern Indonesia Project, Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University, New York, 1960.

In 1931, three Malays from Singapore approached the union asking for help. They were to be repatriated back to Singapore but had not been paid for three months and were owed £9. The NAWU Secretary, Toupein, took the matter up with the Customs and Fisheries Office and then approached Ulrich, the manager for Gregory and Co. Negotiating commenced and finally Ulrich informed Toupein that he agreed to pay their wages of £3 per month. The money owed was for the period between the end of the season and the arrival of the next steamer. Even though a new season's crew had been signed on from March 1, they were forced to wait until April 24 for the steamer.⁸³ In this instance, the NAWU acted on behalf of the Malay crew members as if they were union members. In fact the only indication from the *Northern Standard* that these workers were not part of the Darwin community was the fact that the three workers remained unnamed in the lengthy newspaper report.

When Clark was boycotted by his Japanese divers in 1934, he was forced to employ Malay divers. The government Annual Report described their performance as 'unsatisfactory' as 'Japanese divers have maintained a higher standard of efficiency in all phases of the diving operations.'⁸⁴ Nevertheless, the trend toward employing Malay divers continued into the late 1930s as more Japanese left to work offshore in Japanese-owned ventures. In 1937 Clark's Territory Pearling Company employed eleven divers, all Japanese apart from three, Djadi Ratoe, Lobo Ratoe and Kelau Serang. They also had five Malay or Koepanger try-divers, Cornelius, Lidi Bali, Rateo Leba, Kasim and Daniel Roemahkati.⁸⁵ In 1938 Gregory employed three Malay divers: Amdan bin Mahomet, Abdul Halik, and Rajap bin Salim, and two trial divers: Jacobus Latroea and Tetoos Onewehla.⁸⁶ As the status of Malay divers improved, so did their willingness to engage in unionist activism.

In 1938, 14 'Koepangers' went to the NAWU office, complaining that their wages had been stopped for three days and that their rations had been cut. The union secretary McDonald interviewed their employer, Clark, who claimed that the rations were in accordance with the contract he had with

⁸³'Indentured Laborers Obtain their wages', *Northern Standard*, 14 April 1931.

⁸⁴'Report on the Administration of the Northern Territory, Year ended 30th June 1934', p. 20, *CPP*, 1934-7.

⁸⁵A try-diver was a novice diver or apprentice diver. Secretary of TPC, B. Morgan to Nylander, 26 May 1937, Applying for Licences, F1 1938/726, AA NT.

⁸⁶Gregory and Co. to Chief Pearling Inspector, 7 May 1938, F1 1938/402, AA NT.

the Dutch Comptroller at Dobo.⁸⁷ McDonald reported the matter to the Chief Pearling Inspector, Nylander who in turn wrote to Clark stating:

The Dutch crew from your vessels saw me ... There seemed to prevail a certain dissatisfaction amongst the men about rations at the camp. This would be a matter of settlement between you and the men ... As a matter of course I inspected the camp in the afternoon, everything was clean and tidy. ... The crew told me they had no salt, milk, tea (there was coffee) curry or sauce. Their maintenance is a matter for the employer, and perhaps you will look into this matter, as I naturally felt restrained to discuss this phase of your camp arrangements with your crew.⁸⁸

The reprimand was effective and the crew wrote to the *Northern Standard* to express their appreciation of the union support:

We, the undersigned Dobo Malays, of the Dutch East Indies, ... wish to show our appreciation to the N.A.W. Union, especially to Mr. J. A. McDonald, the Secretary, and thank him for the trouble he took in fighting on behalf of us concerning the deduction of wages, shortage of tucker, and accommodation ...

They are scathing in their criticism writing: 'Fancy the capitalist Government helping the slave labour industry! We do not think Hitler could do worse things in Germany than the way we are treated here.' The letter was signed with six names. The men made use of an interpreter W. Gonzales, who was most likely from the Philippines.⁸⁹

Segregation or integration?

According to Elsie Masson, writing in 1914, the 'little worlds' of Darwin separated the society along racial lines, with the four main worlds belonging to the white officialdom, Chinatown, the pearling fleets and the 'native' camps.⁹⁰ Of these four, Masson described the life of the pearling fleet as the

⁸⁷Note that Dobo had been the main pearling market in the Dutch East Indies since the 1800s. Bain, *Full Fathom Five*, p. 13.

⁸⁸K. Nylander to Manager, Territory Pearling Company, 10 December 1938, F1 1938/726, AA NT.

⁸⁹Hermanus, Chasim, Abde, Arnold, Alexsander and Simson, Letter to the editor, 'The N.A.W.U. Thanked', *Northern Standard*, 23 December 1938.

⁹⁰Masson, *Untamed Territory*, p. 51.

'most apart, the most self-contained'.⁹¹ When the pearling industry was exempt from the White Australia policy it was on the understanding that the 'coloured' crews would **remain** a society apart. For them to have lived amongst the white community would have rekindled all the old fears. The classic negative images of multi-racial society as conjured up by the White Australians were those of miscegenation and 'racial' contamination, of 'racial' hatred and inevitable conflict, and of cultural degeneration. Given these dire predictions, the degree to which the pearling crews were able to mingle with the Darwin community is surprising. The following section considers the implementation of White Australia with regard to social policy and the efforts made to safeguard white society.

Japanese within the Darwin community

The Japanese population of Darwin fluctuated according to the relative success of the pearling industry. In 1911 there had been 77 male and 4 female Japanese living in Darwin, but by 1921 there were only 33 men and 3 women.⁹² By 1928, however, as the pearling industry expanded, there were 96 Japanese. Women were not included in the exemption and by this year there was only one Japanese woman left in Darwin. The male adult population increased steadily and by 1937, there were 144.⁹³ Almost all of these were involved in the pearling industry, though several businesses in Cavenagh Street, including a photographer and a lemon squash shop were operated by Japanese.

In the 1920s official relations with the Japanese in Darwin were cordial. In 1926 the town was visited by a Japanese delegation including members of the Japanese House of Representatives. They were met by the President of the Japanese Society, M. Miyagawa, and had lunch with the Acting Administrator in Government House. The *Standard* printed Baron Higuchi's lengthy speech on the 'quality of happiness'.⁹⁴ In 1928, when Darwin's Japanese celebrated the coronation of their new Emperor, the Darwin public were invited to attend and were 'accorded a very generous and hospitable reception'. The celebration took place in the Returned Soldiers' Hall. According to M. Enomi who was interviewed by the

⁹¹*Ibid.*, p. 52.

⁹²Census figures for Darwin, 1911, A1/15 11/16191, AA ACT; Census figures, 4 April 1921, A1/15 1927/7835, AA ACT.

⁹³Report of the Chief Pearling Inspector, K. Nylander, in Report of the Administrator, CPP, 1936-7.

⁹⁴'Japanese delegation', *Northern Standard*, 10 August 1926. Visitors included Baron Higuchi, S. Kurozumi, M. Koya, Y. Ikeda, D. Ishigure, T. Shimasue. and Secretary, M. Ohki.

Standard, they were very pleased that the public 'shared in their celebration'. The journalist was clearly impressed, writing:

Darwin possesses only one Japanese woman, and the arrangements made and the way they were carried out, reflect great credit on the Japanese Society, deprived as they are of their natural share of feminine representation in according the high standards of culture for which their nation is so justly famed.⁹⁵

This type of cultural sharing is more likely to be associated with multicultural Australia rather than White Australia.

According to the alleged concerns of the White Australia policy, one might have predicted that the Japanese pearlers would be restricted as much as possible from interacting with the white community of Darwin. This was not the case. In 1928, the Customs Office in Darwin asked the Department of Home and Territories if it were appropriate for the Japanese to rent a house and establish a home in Cavenagh Street, central Darwin, also known as Chinatown. Sub-Collector Pierce wrote:

The question has been raised as to whether or not indentured labourers are permitted to live in the town, or whether they are restricted to the foreshore when in port. It is claimed by one master pearler that in Broome and Thursday Island, Japanese indents are permitted to live in the town whilst Koepangers and Malays are restricted to the foreshore.⁹⁶

The decision to allow the Japanese to live in the town centre remained in place until the war. In 1936, for example, diver, Saka, stated that he lived behind the shop of Murakami, the photographer, in the town centre.⁹⁷

One of the arguments for allowing the Japanese freedom within Darwin was that divers preferred to live and socialise in Darwin and thus were less likely to work off-shore with Dutch or Japanese competitors. Captain Gregory, writing for the Darwin Pearler's Committee, explained that with 80 Japanese-owned boats operating near Darwin, the drain on skilled divers was keenly felt. He argue that

⁹⁵'The New Mikado, Japanese Celebrations in Darwin', *Northern Standard*, 16 November 1928.

⁹⁶Clifford Pierce, Sub-Collector of Customs, Memo to Home and Territories Department, 29 October 1928, A1/15 30/880, AA ACT.

⁹⁷*Northern Standard*, 7 January 1936.

the only reason we have been able to keep the divers we have, is that the conditions of working out of Darwin are much easier than those on the Japanese fleet, because they come into port oftener, are able to get fresh meat and provisions and also to be ashore for a few days each month, whereas the Japanese boats stay afloat for months, being tendered by schooners and they scarcely ever get on shore.⁹⁸

In 1936 the pearling industry produced an estimated gross value of £88,000.⁹⁹ The power of money was evidently capable of overriding the segregationist push of White Australia.

The Japanese were apparently welcomed by the business people of Darwin who appreciated their ready cash. The *Standard* reported:

Practically the whole of the pearling fleets cleared the harbour last week for the new patch ... Cavenagh Street appears deserted without the crews of coloured men that have been a feature of the town during the lay up season. Business people will miss these men for though the crews are poorly paid they were seldom without cash for amusement.¹⁰⁰

Thomas O'Conner Scott, who worked in A. E. Jolly and Co.'s store — the 'white store' — in the 1930s, described the shop foreman, Charlie Wilson, as 'a real nice bloke' and recalled that he

used to like to serve the Japanese — the pearlers that used to come in. He used to try to learn their lingo. He'd find out how to say good morning, and I believe, if I can remember correctly, it used to be ahoyo [sic]. That meant good morning.¹⁰¹

Evidently the notion that learning Japanese might be good for business was not entirely new in 1980s Australia.

The Japanese Squash shop was also popular with white customers. Betty Humble remembered that it sold 'the most beautiful squashes' made with oranges and lemons and shaved ice and

⁹⁸Gregory & Co. for Darwin Pearlers' Committee to Administrator, 28 Oct. 1936, F1 1937/600, AA NT.

⁹⁹Report of the Chief Pearling Inspector, K. Nylander. 1936-7.

¹⁰⁰*Northern Standard*, 9 March 1937.

¹⁰¹Thomas O'Connor Scott, Transcript of interview by Margaret Kowald, Tape 1, p. 11, 1990, TS 616, NTRS 226, NTAS.

was run by a couple of Japanese chaps, but there always seemed to be other Japanese there too; I think they must've had friends on the pearling luggers, or something and they used to come and stay there sometimes. ... of course they did a roaring business, especially ... when the pictures were on, everyone would race out at interval time for an icecream, or a squash, or a sartee... ¹⁰²

The Squash shop owner, Menami, was evidently known by name in the town, or at least so it would appear from the *Northern Standard* article which described his experience of being attacked by a kangaroo while preparing breakfast at the back of the shop.¹⁰³

The cinema was a special twice weekly event in the small town of Darwin and all the residents gathered for the show. Conigrave's account of Darwin, published in 1936, described the Japanese at the picture shows as 'supercilious', commenting that the Japanese divers 'as the most important persons in the local pearling industry hold aloof, with a touch of arrogant disdain, from all save their own countrymen'.¹⁰⁴ Conigrave's impressions need to be seen in context — he himself was an elite 'silvertail' who had supported white only sport.

The Japanese took part in most Darwin recreations, including attending football games, which took place in the wet season when they were on shore. They were evidently keen football followers. In 1933, after several Darwin luggers had made their base in the Dutch East Indies, the Japanese made a brief visit to Darwin, hoping to watch a football match. Their manager, McKay, attended a meeting of the North Australian Football League to ask if a special match could be held on Saturday. He said he had six Japanese, whom he described as 'ex-Darwinites' who were 'anxious to see a game' and offered them £2/2/0 if they would play. They were refused, politely, as the football would have clashed with the races.¹⁰⁵

In 1938, an incident during the Anniversary Day football procession caused some dismay within the Japanese community. One of the parade floats depicted a recent controversial arrest, with the 'H.M.A.S. Larrakin' (Larrakia) capturing the Japanese lugger the 'Wacko Maroo'. The paper reported:

¹⁰²Betty Humble, Transcript of interview by Margaret Kowald, Tape 1, pp. 6-7, 1990, TS 604, NTRS 226, NTAS.

¹⁰³*Northern Standard*, 7 January 1936.

¹⁰⁴C. Price Conigrave, *North Australia*, Jonathan Cape, London, 1936, p. 120.

¹⁰⁵'N.A. Football League', *Northern Territory*, 6 January 1933.

It is believed the greatest objection was taken to the man impersonating a lubra, held captive on board the lugger. Her pleas to the crowd to be freed from captivity were quietened by gifts of tobacco and large portions of liquor.¹⁰⁶

Nakashiba, secretary of the Japanese Society, said that 'public ridicule of a matter of such delicacy was resented'. Other Japanese chose to boycott the Don and Victoria Hotels which had been responsible for the float. The float was based on the real life drama which was taking place with the capture of Japanese luggers. The reference to Aboriginal women was prompted by the new legislation which sought to prevent Japanese-owned luggers from putting in for water and supplies on the grounds that they were interfering with Aboriginal women and therefore in violation of the Aboriginal Ordinance. The complete description of the float suggests that the joke was aimed as much at the authorities and the hapless H.M.A.S. "Larrakia" which had had to be towed to Darwin by the Japanese lugger it had arrested. Interestingly, the 'foreign' Japanese, meaning those pearlers who were based in Palau in the Caroline Islands were represented by the Darwin community as being quite a different group to the 'local' Japanese. To some extent the community embraced the 'locals' as their own in the face of this new 'foreign' competition.¹⁰⁷

From a Japanese perspective, the issue of their relationships with Aboriginal women pointed to one of the primary injustices of the White Australia policy. In most other respects, Japanese residents had their civil rights upheld — in terms of access to the courts and hospitals for example. But immigration restrictions did not permit Japanese women into Australia, nor were the men permitted to form relationships with the Aboriginal women. Relationships with white women would have been unlikely, especially given their small numbers, and relationships with Chinese women would have been strained, given the war between their two countries. If they had been employed on a temporary contract, as the regulations allowed, then such enforced celibacy might not have appeared so harsh. In reality, however, it was not uncommon for men to have arrived aged 18 and to remain diving for some thirty years. Options for

¹⁰⁶*Northern Standard*, 8 February 1938. The same issue gives the office-bearers of the Japanese Society as: President, I. Okada; Vice-President, M. Kusumoto; Treasurer, K. Mise; Auditors, Y. Saito and G. Naga; Committee, S. Imae, G. Murakami, S. Hakiyama, S. Kojima, R. Takahara, C. Tano, K. Hoshikawa, T. Ano.

¹⁰⁷'Round About', *Northern Standard*, 16 April 1937.

female company were limited. In pre-federation days, there had been five Japanese brothels in Darwin, but these had long since disappeared.¹⁰⁸

The absence of Japanese women in Darwin prompted Xavier Herbert to write a comic short story, titled 'Miss Tanaka'. In Herbert's story, Miss Kitso Tanaka is the niece of Saichi Tanaka who owned the lemon squash shop in Port Darwin. On her arrival she quickly becomes the centre of attraction for 'the lonely young men of Port Darwin'. She is described as 'the only young pure-blooded Japanese female in the community'. Herbert explains that being Australian-born she is particularly special as her nationality would allow her husband to own property. The indentured Japanese, however, would have to be married in the Dutch East Indies as they were prohibited from marrying in Australia.

Herbert's story demonstrates a detailed knowledge of Japanese customs, culture and even language. Miss Tanaka's two admirers are rival divers, described as giants 'before whom the community cringed'.¹⁰⁹ The two divers are portrayed as wealthy, powerful, and surrounded by 'minions'. He plays on their cultural differences, with one diver choosing to dress and act in Occidental fashion, while the other retains Japanese customs. Hanno, described in his courting finery, 'wore a rich kimono and sash, and fine white tabis (socks with pockets for the big toes), and sandals of fine plaited straw and blue velvet'. Sakomoto in contrast is 'fully dressed in white European clothes, even to a solar topi ... and a walking stick'.¹¹⁰

What is most striking is the way in which Herbert constructs the story without reference to any white characters, nor indeed to other Asians. The Japanese divers and traders are described as a community within themselves. The only hint that other ethnic groups might be present, is the comment that among Miss Tanaka's admirers were 'several men of other breeds' and in the passing mention of an anonymous 'blackboy' who delivers their letters.¹¹¹ We are given no sense of the mixed composition of customers to the lemon squash shop. Herbert, like many historians writes selective narratives, which tend to evade the complexities of Darwin's multi-ethnic community.

It would be impossible to generalise, even in a small town such as Darwin, as to the degree of respect given the Japanese community. Attitudes were shifting, different for each individual, based on personal interests and

¹⁰⁸In 1888 there had been five Japanese brothels with 25 prostitutes. D. C. S. Sissons, 'Karayuki-San: Japanese Prostitutes in Australia, 1887-1916 —I', in *Historical Studies*, Volume 17, 1976-1977, p. 328.


¹⁰⁹Xavier Herbert, 'Miss Tanaka', in *Larger Than Life*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1963, p. 171.

¹¹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 175.

¹¹¹*Ibid.*, pp. 170 and 176.

Japanese captain of a pearling lugger – Darwin 1937.
(M119/1 Item 6, National Archives of Australia, ACT)

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experiences. The general impression, from reading the *Northern Standard*, however, is of a good deal of respect and certainly more positive interest than could be found in any similar newspaper today. There were no articles reciting the so-called bad habits of the Japanese, nor could it be said that they were simply ignored. Two main characteristics of nineteenth century stereotyping of Asian workers were that they were rarely referred to by name and described instead in terms of generalised insult. This type of racism becomes untenable, however, when the people in question are given adequate media attention. For this reason, it is significant that the *Northern Standard* chose to personalise the Japanese pearl divers.

For example an article titled 'Pearling tragedy, Death of Diver' told how the lugger 'Mars' arrived at dawn with the body of a diver named Kimoto. He is described as 'an old and experienced diver' in the employ of Mr. Muramats for about twenty years. The article describes how the crew members spent 16 hours trying to save him after he became paralysed.¹¹² When Keikichi Yamada died in 1937 whilst diving, the newspaper reported on the coroner's inquest and explained that he was 52 years old and had been in Australia for 27 years, living in Broome. He had recently been brought to Darwin to replace another diver who had died from fever.¹¹³ The tone of these articles is sympathetic and concerned over the unavoidable tragedies of diving. The number of deaths escalated dramatically when the Japanese pearling fleet came to fish off the Darwin coasts. The newspaper reported the death of Makote Maeda, an 18 year old diver on the Japanese lugger Daikoku Maru. His was the ninth death that season and the year before 18 divers from the Japanese-owned fleet had been killed by paralysis.¹¹⁴ In the late 1930s, the Darwin luggers, by comparison, under the watchful eye of Pearling Inspector, Karl Nylander, often had an entire season with no deaths reported.

The Darwin Japanese Society which acted as a kind of divers' union, was similarly well advertised in the *Standard*. Just as the NAWU listed the results of their annual elections, so too the Japanese Society in 1932 named the persons in all 14 positions from President to Committee member.¹¹⁵

One of the main concerns in any multi-ethnic community is the ability to communicate in a common language. One interview quoted a local

¹¹²*Northern Standard*, 8 September 1931.


¹¹³'Death of Japanese Diver', *Northern Standard*, 2 April 1937.

¹¹⁴*Northern Standard*, 11 July 1939.

¹¹⁵*Northern Standard*, 4 March 1932. President - K. Asaki; Vice-President - I. Okada; Secretary - Y. Sato; Treasurer - H. Higashi; Auditor - G. Takada and S. Yamane; Committee: S. Nishi, I. Higashi, S. Yoshida, M. Yokoyama, H. Nakayama, T. Saka, Y. Yamamoto, N. Okusaki.

Mr. Nakashiba and adopted European son, Peter - Darwin 1937.
(M119 Item 74, National Archives of Australia, ACT)

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Japanese diver as stating: 'new patch all the same chicken feed alonga ground, big mob fowl come along clean 'em up quick fellow.'¹¹⁶ The 'pidgin' English was similarly used by some Aborigines and older Chinese. Reporter Jessie Litchfield, also quoted Malay, Bin Hadji, speaking 'pidgin'.¹¹⁷ The usual practice of the *Standard*, however, was to translate all interviews into English direct from Japanese, avoiding the use of 'pidgin', which was regarded as problematic in that it re-enforced British colonial notions of superiority over colonised peoples. Darwin, like multicultural Australia, had a daily need for interpreters. The Police Court in particular had to deal with some ten different languages on a regular basis. Finding interpreters was not difficult however, as there were many bi-lingual and tri-lingual residents, particularly among the younger generation.¹¹⁸

The *Standard* did not shy away from defending the Japanese against unwarranted attacks even when the perpetrators were white men. A 1938 article titled, 'Japanese Lad Assaulted, Albatross Sailors Ashore' was clearly sympathetic to the victim. The reporter wrote:

A young Japanese apprentice on the Japanese pearling lugger Konopera Maru was on Wednesday night treated at the Darwin Hospital for a sprained ankle and shock, alleged to have been received in an altercation with sailors from H.M.S. Albatross. Sugawa Tamwatsu, 17, and his companion were sitting near the landing steps of the jetty at 11.15 p.m. waiting for some of their compatriots to return from the pictures before boarding their boat. The drunken sailors approached and without provocation are alleged to have kicked Tamwatsu in the back, knocking him down the iron steps into the harbour. His companion went to his aid, but the sailors are alleged to have chased him with bottles. He escaped and reported the matter to the local Japanese agent, Mr. J. I. Nakashiba. The police were then called and Constable McNab proceeded to the jetty where by that time the Japanese boy had been given medical attention by an officer on the Albatross. An X-ray examination showed no bones were broken.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁶'Round About', *Northern Standard*, 16 April 1937.

¹¹⁷Jessie Litchfield, 'Press Collect', unpublished manuscript, Litchfield Papers, MS 132, p. 153, NLA.

¹¹⁸Young Peter Nakashiba acted as interpreter for the Japanese illegal fishing cases. His parentage is not known precisely, but it was presumed that he was the son of the president of the Japanese Club, Nakashiba and an Australian mother.

¹¹⁹*Northern Standard*, 22 July 1938.

The tone of this article is typical of the *Standard*. The reader is invited to be shocked at the brutal conduct of the sailors and to identify with the plight of the young Japanese 'lad'. It presumes a sympathetic audience who will condemn this act of violence. Importantly, the attack is not represented as a case of 'racial' conflict. The victim's nationality is stated, but by giving his name, age and details of the incident the reporter conjures up a personal image rather than a 'racial' type.

While there was little evidence of antagonism between the Japanese and the local white population, this cannot be said of their relationship with the Chinese and Malays. Even so, there was evidently a degree of mixed socializing. In 1936, for example, when the police raided a gambling game in Chinatown, they found six Japanese, two Chinese, one European playing and one Malay and two 'coloured' men watching.¹²⁰ The house was owned by a Japanese. The raid does not speak well for the police relationship with the Japanese, but the mixed crowd at the gambling table suggests that entertainment was not racially segregated.¹²¹

Christine Choo, writing on Broome some years earlier, emphasised the 'racial' tensions between the Japanese and other Asians. She describes Japanese attitudes of superiority towards 'the Malays, Manilamen and Koepangers', which fueled antagonism, eventually flaring up in riots in 1914, 1920 and 1921.¹²² It appears that the primary cause of dissent was the harsh treatment of Koepangers by Japanese employers. Given that the working and living arrangements in Darwin were under stricter supervision, it is possible that such disputes were kept to a minimum. Also, the authority of the white pearling masters in Darwin was such that they would more likely have been the target of worker dissatisfaction, rather than the Japanese. It was only while out to sea that the Japanese captains had complete authority over their Koepanger crews, but I have not yet found any evidence of overt conflict.

After 1937, as the Japanese invasion of China proceeded, the relationship between the Japanese and the rest of the community, particularly the Chinese suffered. The newspaper spoke of the repercussions of the Japanese incursion into China, commenting that

¹²⁰In this context I presume the term 'coloured' is used in place of 'half-caste'; The gambling house was owned by a man called Sato, according to reporter Jessie Litchfield, 'Press Collect', p. 48.

¹²¹'Police Court', *Northern Standard*, 17 January 1936.

¹²²Christine Choo, 'Asian Men on the West Kimberley Coast, 1900-1940', in Jan Gothard (ed.), *Asian Orientations: Studies in Western Australian History*, University of Western Australia, 1995, pp. 103-4.

the local Chinese have evidently decided to have no dealings with Japanese and to boycott all functions they may be associated with. ... when the Japanese endeavoured to hire four Chinese waiter boys for a reception to the Press, held at the Japanese Club House on Tuesday, they were advised not one was available.'¹²³

At this time, reports were coming in that the Japanese planes had raided Nanking and claimed to have destroyed the Ming Palace. Under the circumstances the Chinese response might be described as remarkably restrained.¹²⁴

When the 1916 Royal Commission exempted pearlers from the White Australia policy it had been assumed that the crews would remain off-shore on their boats, or segregated in foreshore camps. The Commission had not anticipated their social participation in town life: in pubs, at the football, at the cinema and in the shops.

Malays in the community

The position of the Malay pearling crews in Darwin was quite different from that of the Japanese. The Japanese had business connections, visiting dignitaries, and news items from home. They had a strong sense of national pride which bolstered them against White Australian nationalism. Home for the 'Malays' was the Dutch East Indies, or Malaya, in the case of Singaporeans. In essentials it was not so very different from Australia — yet another place where European colonial rule kept them in a position of subordination. Given that both were plural, hierarchical societies, the question arises as to which allowed them the more freedom.

One particular complaint, made by Sergeant Koop in 1936, in Darwin, demonstrates not only their relative freedom of movement, but the desire of some administrative staff to have that freedom curtailed. Koop complained of the lack of control over indentured aliens, writing that

the Malay and Koepang divers and crews freely patronise the hotels and become very arrogant and uppish towards other members of the civilian community. It is almost certain that serious affrays will eventuate unless steps are taken to curtail the freedom of the Malay and Koepang indents and to keep them out of the town. During the

¹²³'The Undeclared War, Local Repercussions', *Northern Standard*, 3 December 1937.

¹²⁴'Japanese advance resumed', *Northern Standard*, 7 December 1937.

last week a group of Malays came into conflict with two white men and, it is reported, an ugly clash was narrowly averted. On Friday evening last, Cavenagh Street was crowded by bands of Malays and others who were in an excited condition and who had to be forcibly pushed off the footpath and street corners, by me, to permit women and others to pass along the street. ... I am strongly of the opinion that Compounds, for the housing of these indentured labourers, should be established and that they be only allowed in the streets by permits.¹²⁵

Koop apparently accepted segregation as a system of dealing with multi-racial communities. The notion of the Compound was familiar to many British colonies such as Singapore and was already mandatory for the Aboriginal population. There is an interesting tension between Koop's depiction of their 'arrogance' and his desire to put them 'in their place'. The wealth and confidence of pearlers was entirely based on their hard work at a difficult and dangerous job. Most locals admired them and understood that their wealth came at risk of death from diving.

The reply from the Chief Pearling Inspector, Nylander, reveals a certain sympathy for the indentured workers. He wrote:

It is so difficult to find a way out, seeing that the men, when leaving temporarily the crowded space of their boats behind, naturally desire to make the best of a short-lived change of mode of life. Yet, it appears, that they may abuse the privilege.¹²⁶

The support of Nylander and no doubt the financial clout of the pearling masters was sufficient that no steps were taken to implement Koop's suggestion. At the time, there were 89 Malay and Koepangers employed by the pearling industry in 1937.¹²⁷

McDonald, secretary of the NAWU, held similar views to Koop. In 1937 he criticised the freedom of the pearling community on the grounds that they were responsible for the prevalence of venereal disease. His initial statement appears to be against any notion of racial discrimination. In fact, he criticised Dr. Cook for targeting and quarantining only 'half-caste' women as if they were the only likely suspects. He wrote:

¹²⁵A. E. Koop, Sgt, to Superintendent of Police, Stretton, Darwin, 18 October 1936, F1 1936/220, AA NT.

¹²⁶Nylander to Crown Law Officer, Darwin, 30 October, 1936, F1 1936/220, AA NT.

¹²⁷Report of the Chief Pearling Inspector, K. Nylander, 1936-7.

If a coloured person is a menace to the community because he is affected by disease, I would imagine that the menace would be just as great if the affected person had a white skin.¹²⁸

Despite his professed 'colour' blindness, McDonald was scathing in his criticism of the indentured pearling crews. He wrote:

For years Darwin had been wide open for Koepangers, Malays, Maccassars, Aroe Islanders, Japanese or other races of coloured people, and no steps have ever been taken by the Customs or Fisheries Departments to prevent them taking up their residence anywhere they care to in the town. After having strutted the streets and swaggered out and in the pub bars, they are at liberty to visit the homes of the halfcastes without any hindrance by the police or any other authority. There is what can only be described as a barracks for Asiatics near the foot of Cavenagh Street, and it was well known to every resident that half caste women nightly visited this den. There is another such place at what is known as the 'Stone Houses' in the same street, and every night one can see groups of men from the pearling fleets congregating there, along with the coloured girls from the town.¹²⁹

In McDonald's view this situation was unacceptable, even though he acknowledged that it was generally 'accepted as part of the ordinary life of Darwin'. If McDonald had had sufficient influence no doubt the pearling crews would have been segregated from the town centre and perhaps even banned from entering the pub.

Again in 1938, an unnamed union commentator complained that there was not sufficient segregation of the 'coloured' workers. The columnist wrote:

There is far too much latitude allowed to coloured races in Darwin, and this does not only apply to aboriginals. There is a barracks in Cavenagh Street for indentured coloured pearlers, and they are allowed to roll about to the public gaze in an almost naked condition. There is another large crowd of Malays housed in a shell

¹²⁸'V.D. Scandal', *Northern Standard* 5 March 1937.

¹²⁹'V.D. Epidemic Scandal', *Northern Standard*, 2 March 1937.

shed near the Daly Street bridge, and just what arrangements have been made for them to comply with the housing conditions which are made compulsory for whites, it is hard to say.¹³⁰

It is not altogether clear why the NAWU officials felt it their duty to protect public morals. Perhaps, like politicians, they voiced their disapproval in order to improve their public image. Most were married men and strict Catholics, so perhaps, after all this was simply an indication of their disapproval of promiscuity in general.

International Soccer

Despite the apparent antagonism of unionists towards the freedom of Malays, the NAWU was supportive of their involvement in Darwin's sporting life. They helped to promote an 'international' soccer game, in 1936, in which the Singapore luggermen challenged the Aru Island luggermen. To be specific, though, it was not McDonald who supported the match, but the president of the NAWU, Bob Murray. Murray, unlike McDonald, had spent his life in Darwin and had been involved in the 1927 union protest against segregated sport.¹³¹ We cannot assume that these two individuals thought alike on matters of 'race'.

The game was played on Saturday afternoon on the Darwin Oval. The *Northern Standard* advised that the proceeds of the match were to be given to the hospital and invited those 'interested in good clean sport' to come along.¹³² The newspaper report of the match stated that attendance 'was somewhat disappointing'. They named Abraham and Thomas as being goal-kickers for the winning Aru Island team and Lemon for the Singaporeans. They also named Sale, as goal-keeper for the Aru Island team as having 'saved the day for his team'. The teams reported that they hoped to have other matches when they returned from their season on the Aru Island pearling grounds.¹³³ The significance of this game goes far beyond the mere promotion of sport. The game was reported in the same fashion as the usual games in Darwin and in doing so, the individual luggermen became names that all of Darwin would read. Where before they had been labelled as 'coolies' or 'indents', known only by their nationality and occupation, now

¹³⁰'Gossip and Grumbles', *Northern Standard*, 11 March 1938.

¹³¹See chapter seven.

¹³²'Singapore Luggermen', *Northern Standard*, 6 March 1936.

¹³³'Singapore v Aru Islands', *Northern Standard*, 10 March 1936.

they were named as 'goal-kickers' and 'goal-keepers'. These were honorable positions in the eyes of most Darwin residents.

It would be interesting to know why the Japanese did not take part in these soccer matches. Their absence suggests that they did not share in the camaraderie of the Singaporeans and Aru Islanders. Perhaps their superior rank over the lugger crews preserved a certain social distance. Perhaps soccer had not yet been introduced to Japan as it clearly had in Singapore and the Dutch East Indies? In any case, by the late 1930s, with the Japanese incursion into China, they were unlikely to be invited to play against Darwin's Chinese Soccer team.

The following year in 1937, further soccer games were held, this time all the team members being listed by the *Northern Standard*. Most gave only their Dutch Christian names, indicating the degree to which the Dutch colonial administration had encouraged assimilation. None of the players had names of obviously Moslem Malay origin, but some were indigenous to the islands.¹³⁴ Finally a match was organised between local Darwin team (comprised of white and 'coloured' locals) and the Koepangers. Rather appropriately, well-known sporting figure, Put Ah Mat, of Malay-Thursday Islander descent was chosen as the referee. One of the Darwin players was policeman Fred Don who worked alongside Sergeant Koop, suggesting that he did not share Koop's segregationist attitude.¹³⁵ The Darwin team won the match and the newspaper commentator wrote: 'The little Koepangers played pretty football, and did very well to hold the heavy Australian team to one goal.'¹³⁶

These tentative signs of inter-ethnic cooperation elicited a negative response from the Dutch East Indies authorities, where such interaction was regarded as subversive to their colonial rule. In February 1937, a complaint was received from a Dobo correspondent indicating that the Dutch administration disapproved of the freedom allowed Aru Islanders in Darwin. It was suggested that the Australian government should take action to regulate the behaviour of indents and to prevent them from entering hotels. The correspondent noted with approval that the Dutch at least knew how to 'manage and administer their native population'. Commenting on the difference between the Dutch and Australian systems, he argued that

¹³⁴'Soccer', *Northern Standard*, 8 January 1937.

¹³⁵Henry Lee, Transcript of interview by S. Saunders, 1981, pp. 14-15, TS 261, NTRS 226, NTAS.

¹³⁶*Northern Standard*, 22 January 1937.

it does not matter what position in life a white man holds — he is always a 'Toean' and is respected as such, and it is to be hoped that those 'Whitemen' of Darwin who mix and associate with the native indents, will try and uphold their prestige as a white man, and not forget that Australia is proud of her 'White Australia'.¹³⁷

From the perspective of Dobo, Darwin appeared as a wayward egalitarian society with little regard for the 'proper' enforcement of 'racial' hierarchy.

The crucial aspect of this colonial social structure was that it inherently precluded any sense of national citizenship based on egalitarian principles; rather it created a fixed 'racial' hierarchy. According to Wim Wertheim, who was part of the Dutch East Indies administration in 1931, their social system was based on a fixed 'racial hierarchy expressed in the 'colour line'. He described the society in terms of

a settled population of whites separated from the native masses by a practically unbridgable social barrier. This colour line is the foundation of the whole colonial system, since it lies at the base of the social, the economic and the political structures. ... The colour line is horizontal; it cuts through each colonial society such that the natives remain in the lower ranges, the white constituting the upper layer. Discrimination and subordination occur in terms of group qualities: the natives are not treated in terms of their individual capacities, but as members of an undifferentiated group.¹³⁸

Conclusion

The social system of the Dutch East Indies, which ensured white hegemony, has been described by Furnivall as being a plural society in which each 'racial' group was ranked as a separate segment of the society. According to van Doorn, the system was intended to facilitate the administration of their colonies, and served to preserve a social distance between the colonial elite and the mass of the population.¹³⁹ From the general histories of Australian 'race' relations, one might have considered this model as appropriate for

¹³⁷'Aroe Island Notes', *Northern Standard*, 26 February 1937.

¹³⁸Wim Wertheim, 'Netherlands-Indian Colonial Racism and Dutch Home Racism', in Jan Breman (ed.), *Imperial Monkey Business, Racial Supremacy in Social Darwinist Theory and Colonial Practice*, VU University Press, Amsterdam, 1990, pp. 71-2.

¹³⁹J. J. A. van Doorn, 'A Divided Society: Segmentation and Mediation in Late-Colonial Indonesia', in *Papers of the Dutch-Indonesian Historical Conference*, Bureau of Indonesian Studies, Leiden, 1982, p. 128.

describing Darwin's multi-ethnic society. But White Australia did not have an official policy for dealing with multi-ethnic communities. The result was a degree of *laissez-faire*, which allowed some white community leaders to emphasise segregation on the grounds of protecting White Australia, while others chose integration on the grounds that this lay at the heart of White Australian egalitarianism.

These case studies of Japanese and Malay indentured workers have demonstrated the many paradoxes of Darwin life. Their employment was shrouded in the heavy restrictions of a paranoid White Australia and yet their lives, while on shore, were not so very different from those of other Darwin residents. They mingled and socialised with relative freedom in public life. Even their purported enemies, the White Australian unionists, were not without some sense of solidarity. Darwin combined the two supposedly incendiary elements, unemployed white unionists and indentured 'coloured' labourers, and yet this is not a story of virulent racial conflict. If we are seeking confirmation of the 'yellow peril' image of Asian workers, this particular narrative has offered lean pickings. The 'coolie' is also strikingly absent. This chapter suggests that stereotypical images of both Asian workers and Australian unionists are not appropriate when discussing early twentieth-century Australia.

Chapter nine

Chinese workers

In their monograph, *Racism and Society*, John Solomos and Les Back point out that despite the literature on the subject of racism, there is little research into the historical trends of anti-racism and that as a result, 'much of the public discussion about anti-racism remains at the level of rhetoric and abstract generalisations'.¹ Nowhere is this criticism more warranted than in the dearth of research into Chinese labour conditions in twentieth-century Australia. Changes in attitudes towards Chinese workers have been almost totally ignored by historians. This is odd, given that the focal point of the White Australia policy was the antagonism of the labour movement toward Chinese workers. This conflict has been well covered in studies of the late nineteenth century, such as those by Andrew Markus and Ann Curthoys. Similarly, *Who Are Our Enemies?*, chose to focus on racism in the nineteenth century. In this collection, only Kay Saunders considers the position of Chinese workers in the twentieth century, but her comments on the 1911 Sugar Strike suggest the continuation of prejudice rather than any shift towards anti-racism.² In the latest publication, *Australian Labour History Reconsidered*, Mark Hearn writes on the relationship between white unionists and Chinese workers, again focusing on late nineteenth-century racism and stereotypical images of the Chinese as the 'other'.³

To my knowledge, there has been no research on the shift away from racism as it related to Chinese workers in Australia. Michael Quinlan and Constance Lever-Tracy, in their paper, 'From labour market exclusion to industrial solidarity: Australian trade union responses to Asian workers, 1830-1988' are quick to dismiss the period of 1900 to 1945 as one of White Australia. They go so far as to argue that given the 'homogenisation of the population' during this period, ' "racial" distinctions ceased to be part of most people's experiences'. Their analysis of attitudes towards Chinese

¹John Solomos and Les Back, *Racism and Society*, Macmillan Press Ltd., London, 1996, p. 103.

²Saunders, Kay, 'Masters and Servants', in A. Curthoys and A. Markus (eds.), *Who Are Our Enemies? Racism and the Australian Working Class*, Hale & Iremonger, ASSLH, Sydney, 1978, pp. 96-111.

³Mark Hearn, 'Mates and Strangers: The Ethos of the Australian Workers Union', in David Palmer, Ross Shanahan and Martin Shanahan (eds.), *Australian Labour History Reconsidered*, Australian Humanities Press, Unley, 1999, p. 27.

workers was that most were working in restaurants where they failed 'to arouse concern in terms of job competition'.⁴ This suggestion that racism diminished as the numbers of Chinese became proportionally less is problematic as it tends to place the blame for racism onto its victims. It tells us nothing about the shift from racism to anti-racism during this period. Similarly Greg Patmore's chapter on 'Race, Ethnicity and Work: Australia 1788-1972' in his book *Australian Labour History*, simply omits the years from 1901 to 1945.⁵ Chinese workers are discussed only alongside the 'Kanakas', suffering under nineteenth century White Australian prejudice.

Perhaps most misleading of all, are studies on the Chinese which have taken a post-colonial approach, with the result that any sense of change over time has been deliberately blurred. Ouyang Yu, for example, discusses the relegation of Chinese workers to 'lower order' employment such as cooking and laundry work over the period 1888 to 1988. Drawing on literary images this paper reproduces representations of Chinese workers with little regard for historical context.⁶ The result is the impression that nothing changed over the hundred year period. While literary imagery may have promoted echoes of previous times, there are other social and political changes which need to be examined in order to gain a more nuanced picture.

There have been studies of Chinese communities which have helped to fill in the pieces of that picture. In the case of Darwin, Diana Giese's *Beyond Chinatown* which relies heavily on oral histories, avoids stereotypical images by considering individual case studies. Unfortunately, she does not consider the Chinese in the context of the labour movement nor as a source of supposed 'competition' for white workers. My intention is to re-examine the story of Chinese Australian community in Darwin in the light of White Australia's labour movement, filling in the missing years, and hopefully reconsidering the ahistorical stereotypes of Chinese workers.

This chapter maps the experiences of Chinese workers in Darwin, from 1911 to World War Two, focusing on the 1920s and 1930s as decades of crucial change for Chinese workers. As with previous chapters, White Australian attitudes towards their work will be considered alongside their experiences within the Darwin community. One of the difficulties in

⁴Michael Quinlan and Constance Lever-Tracy, 'From Labor Market Exclusion to Industrial Solidarity: Australian Trade Union Responses to Asian Workers, 1930-1988', in M. Easson, (ed.), *Australia and Immigration: able to grow?*, Pluto Press & Labour Council of NSW, Sydney, 1990, pp. 14-46, p. 169.

⁵Greg Patmore, *Australian Labour History*, Longman Cheshire, Melbourne, 1991, pp. 194-99

⁶Ouyang Yu, 'All the Lower Order: Representations of Chinese cooks, Market Gardeners, Street Hawkers, Laundrymen, Storekeepers, Domestic Servants and Herbalists in Australian Literature from 1888 to 1988', in Paul Macgregor (ed.), *Histories of the Chinese in Australasia and the South Pacific*, Museum of Chinese Australian History, Melbourne, 1995, pp. 100-112.

discussing the position of Chinese workers is that for the most part, they were self-employed, or if they were employed it was by more wealthy Chinese, or more often by their own families as part of a family business. In addition, the few written records of Chinese opinion are mainly those of the wealthy merchant class, and as was discussed in Chapter Three, some were complicit in the colonial system of exploitation of Chinese labour. It must be acknowledged, therefore, that the sources on which this discussion is based make it difficult to build a 'history from below' picture of Chinese workers.

Excluding Chinese workers, 1911-1915.

From the perspective of the Darwin Chinese, the year 1911 marked the beginning of White Australia's discriminatory labour policy. At that time there were 364 male and 78 female Chinese, out of a population of 1387 living in Darwin. The Chinese were the largest ethnic group in the port town, outnumbering the European and Aboriginal populations.⁷ Despite many departures, the Chinese population remained steady over the next decade due to the large number of children being born. By 1933 their numbers had decreased slightly, but with an increased white population they made up only 20 per cent of the population.⁸ This figure fell to just 10 per cent by the year 1941.⁹ Those born overseas, were mostly from southern China or Hong Kong and were loosely referred to as Cantonese.¹⁰ There have been several studies of the Darwin Chinese, by Diana Giese, Suzi Hutchings and others. These have suggested that the dialects groups included Sze Yap and Heung-san and some Hakka.¹¹ Apart from different dialect groups, the most obvious social division between the Darwin Chinese was based on wealth and status. There were the wealthy merchants and storekeepers who had sufficient money to travel to China and to pay for their children's education; and there were many poorer Chinese who struggled to survive, working in a variety of labouring jobs. During this period, however, the population shifted from a majority Chinese-born to a

⁷Census figures for Darwin, 5 mile radius, 1911, A1/15 11/16191, AA ACT.

⁸Eric Sager, *Discovering Darwin: The 1930s in memory and history*, Historical Society of the Northern Territory, Darwin, 1993, p. 6.

⁹Diana Giese, *Beyond Chinatown, Changing Perspectives on the Top End Chinese Experience*, National Library of Australia, Canberra, 1995, p. 11.

¹⁰Report on Northern Territory, 1922, A1/15 1927/7835; Customs Form, Darwin, 14 April 1916, Statutory Declaration signed by Ah Sing, born Canton, Minute Paper, Dept. of Home and Territories, 4 June 1919, A1/15 19/8168, Australian Archives, ACT (AA ACT)..

¹¹Diana Giese, *Beyond Chinatown*, p. 43; Hutchings, Suzi, *The Darwin Chinese 1874-1983, Transformations in Ethnic identity and its situation*, B.A. Honours Thesis, Department of Anthropology, University of Adelaide, 1983, p. 37.

majority Australian-born and these young second-generation Chinese were influential in reshaping the image of Chinese workers in Australia.

The attitudes of unionists towards the Chinese workers in the 1910s has already been touched on in Chapter Three. This period provides a classic example of White Australian prejudice. The effects of Labor's white labour project were devastating for the Chinese workers. Both those in wage employment, such as the waterside workers, and many who were self-employed, such as fishermen, found themselves thrown out of work by a series of pro-white labour ordinances. Many were left destitute and were forced to return to China.

A letter petitioning the government, written by the Chinese storekeepers in 1911, described their plight:

Many of these Chinese are married men with families, and they are dependent upon their manual labors for a livelihood. If all areas of employment in connection with Govt. works (which have previously been open to them) are absolutely closed to them it means great hardship and in many cases starvation. ... most of us have lived in Palmerston for a great many years. At the time we came we were free to do so and to settle here. We expended our money in business here and have always been law abiding and paid our rates and taxes and in every other respect conformed to general and local laws. We are not for a moment complaining about the Immigration policy and want that to be understood. ... All we ask is that the Chinese who are left shall not by future legislation be adversely affected as against the rest of the community without any compensation or redress. Had much of the legislation that has been passed ... recently been in existence years ago most of us would not have settled here. As it is now we have had no notice that such changes were about to be made and we have no compensation offered us. Most of our fellow countrymen are too poor to leave, and the only alternative seems to be to die from starvation.¹²

The government response was to offer free passage to Hong Kong for those Chinese who wished to return 'home', ignoring that fact that after so many years, Australia had become their home. The Labor government did not even consider revoking the legislation which prevented the Chinese from

¹²Chinese storekeepers to Justice Mitchell, Government Resident, 22 March 1911, A1/15 1912/10547.

working, as this was deemed to be a crucial element of the White Australia policy.

The lack of concern from the federal government was somewhat mitigated by the intervention of Administrator J. Gilruth, who could see first hand the results of their discrimination. Despite the fact that he had the task of implementing the policy changes, his letters to the government were critical of the new policies:

The original Chinese were brought here with the full approval of the Government of the day; some have become naturalized and a small number has been born in Australia. If they are not permitted to make a living under circumstances which prevent them undercutting white labour either as regards wages ... they must be maintained at the expense of the general taxpayer. I presume they cannot be deported, and certainly they cannot be allowed to starve.¹³

Gilruth highlights the moral dilemma posed by the internal politics of White Australia. Apparently oblivious to this problem, the Labor government was prepared to make life for Chinese Australians so inhospitable that they would be forced to leave of their own accord. It is puzzling that historians have paid so much attention to the injustice of the Immigration Restriction Act, using it as the symbol of White Australian racism. Like the Chinese residents of Darwin, I would argue that it was the laws aimed at long-term residents, which were the most morally indefensible, for these people, as Australian residents, were being discriminated against in their own homes, by their own government.

The ban on Chinese employment was only a small part of the overall federal scheme. Diana Giese discusses the physical relocation of the Chinese community, some of whom were forced to leave central Chinatown in 1913 after a number of dwellings were demolished. The administration regarded Chinatown as an unsightly slum and argued the cramped living conditions and lack of hygiene endangered public health. The predominantly Chinese, Malay and Filipino residents of Chinatown refused to leave Australia, however, and Gilruth was obliged to offer them land at a site two miles from the town centre, called Police Paddock.¹⁴ As with the removal of the Aboriginal population to the Kahlin Compound, this was partly an attempt to create a white township by means of segregating the 'coloured' races. In

¹³Gilruth, Administrator, to Minister for External Affairs, 10 May 1912, A1/15 12/4995, AA ACT.

¹⁴Diana Giese, *Beyond Chinatown*, pp. 10-11.

fact, Chinatown survived very much as it had been, simply less congested. It was not until wartime, in 1942, that Chinatown was finally destroyed on government orders.¹⁵

Despite the attacks made on the Chinese community by the federal government and the AWU in the 1910s, the local community of Darwin were generally supportive of the Chinese. The Chinese wrote:

We can only add that we feel a debt of gratitude to our European fellow townsmen, a great many of whom — of all shades of opinion — have expressed their sympathy to us insofar as we have been affected by legislation of the class referred to and have offered to sign a Petition or assist us in any way we suggest ...¹⁶

This overt victimisation, therefore, was not a product of local lobbying, so much as an officially imposed policy, coming from Melbourne, from the Fisher Labor government.

Yet another plea was sent to the government in May 1912. This time the Chinese spoke of the plight of the wharfies writing:

It is stipulated in inviting tenders for contracts that the work must be performed by European labor if available. This shuts up avenues of employment formerly open to Chinese. Many Chinese coolies until recently found employment as wharf laborers, but now the ships agents inform us that European labor must be employed with the result that European labor is invariably employed.¹⁷

This use of the term 'coolies' to describe the Chinese waterside workers was an unfortunate choice, as it merely played into the hands of the unionists who were against any form of 'cheap' labour. The Chinese merchants may have regarded their compatriots as 'coolies' but in 1912, with the fall of the Manchu dynasty in China, such class distinctions were soon to become anachronistic.¹⁸

¹⁵The Japanese bombing of Darwin was used as an excuse to bulldoze what remained of Chinatown.

¹⁶Chinese storekeepers to Justice Mitchell, Government Resident, 22 March 1911, A1/15 1912/10547.

¹⁷Chinese businessmen, Darwin to Josiah Thomas, Minister for External Affairs, 7 May 1912, A1/15 1912/10547, AA ACT.

¹⁸Wang Gungwu, *Community and Nation, China, Southeast Asia and Australia*, Asian Studies Association of Australia with Allen & Unwin, Kensington, 1992, p. 29.

No longer 'coolies'

It is reasonable to question the use of the term 'coolie' for Chinese workers even as early as 1911. According to the Government Resident, the departure of so many of the young Chinese from the Territory had caused an increase in their wages. He commented that there were no white domestic servants in the Territory and that with the Chinese demanding such high wages, women could not 'afford the luxury of a help, except that of an aboriginal'.¹⁹ Chinese servants, therefore, were now regarded as a 'luxury'. In a similar vein, the new Labor Administrator, Gilruth, believed that

in whatever business the Chinaman competes with the white man, the latter objects even though the Chinaman may charge as much for his labour as would a white man. ... That they are not working small returns is proved by the fact ... that it is only now, nearly a month after my arrival, that I have been able to secure a cook of any kind and am forced to pay a Chinaman £10 a month and keep, and further, to take the first that offers!²⁰

The tendency for Chinese cooks and servants to demand high wages became more pronounced over the next decade. In 1927 one of Darwin's 'silvertails', Mrs. Finniss, complained that Chinese cooks were asking £20 a month and she added, 'you must be careful to give your cook courteous notification if you desire to bring a guest home to dinner.'²¹ Ironically the White Australia policy had improved the work situation for Chinese cooks in that their services came to be regarded as scarce and therefore valuable.

Not only were Chinese workers no longer regarded as 'cheap' labour, but also it became clear that they were willing to support the cause of unionised labour. Having been denied access to the Darwin AWU, they demonstrated their working-class consciousness by joining the Industrial Workers of the World in 1915.²² Representations of Chinese workers which acknowledged these factors appeared in the *Northern Territory Times*:

¹⁹Acting Government Resident, Darwin to Minister for External Affairs, 28 July 1911, A1/15 12/4995, AA ACT.

²⁰Gilruth, Administrator, to Minister for External Affairs, 10 May 1912, A1/15 12/4995, AA ACT.

²¹'Lure of the South', *Northern Standard*, 4 February 1927.

²²Verity Burgmann, *Revolutionary Industrial Unionism The Industrial Workers of the World in Australia*, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, 1995, p. 90.

The colored men who are working the "Nisshu Maru" are all old residents of the Northern Territory, and, a few years back, did all the Waterside work. They are all sailors and efficient waterside men, but with the march of events, they have now a very precarious means of existence, as unionists will not permit them to be employed on any works with unionists, and they are denied all Government work. The average period of residence in Australia of each of those now employed is over twenty-one years ... Their membership of the I.W.W. has availed them nothing, for the stronger union here will not recognise their right to employment anywhere. They are exceedingly timid men, and under a demonstration of force of the watersiders on Friday evening they almost broke into flight.²³

Here the Chinese are depicted as 'waterside men' a term which carried positive connotations in labour circles and contrasted sharply with alternative images of 'coolies' or 'Chinese boys'. Nevertheless, they were still described as being 'timid' in the face of the more forceful white watersiders. In the masculine world of the AWU such images of weakness were calculated to stress the otherness of 'Asiatic' workers.

While the unionists continued to show prejudice towards the Chinese community there were signs that they too questioned the consequences of their discrimination. In 1917, TAFF, a White Australian poet, cited in Chapter Three, appeared to have a change of heart.²⁴ His new poem: 'A Little Child shall Lead them (The conversion of a rabid White Australian)', described his encounter with a Chinese toddler in Darwin:

... "Shake hands," he said, and smiled at me,
Who'd drive all colour out —
But this dear child has caused me to
Turn to the right about.
To kick myself I felt inclined
For what I'd done and said.
Equality for all we want —
All bitterness is dead.²⁵

²³*Northern Territory Times*, 2 September 1915

²⁴*Northern Territory Times*, 13 September 1917.

²⁵*Northern Territory Times*, 27 September 1917.

TAFF's conversion from 'rabid White Australian' calls into question the role of structural racism in determining attitudes in this period. His encounter demonstrates the importance of individual experience in overcoming prejudice.

If unionists were somewhat erratic in their attitudes, it was partly due to a failure of the White Australia creed to provide a guide to living with non-white Australians. It was presumed that Australia's supposedly homogeneous population would have no need to consider 'racial' issues. Having initially responded to the continued presence of Chinese workers with calls for segregation, desperate to achieve an ethnically homogeneous workforce, the unionists were perhaps beginning to realise that they were an integral part of the Darwin community.

In 1921, with the founding of the Communist Party of Australia, there was an increase in awareness of Chinese workers in Australia. The *Northern Standard*, Darwin's union newspaper, reported that the employment of 'colored labor in Northern Australia' was 'perturbing union officials in Sydney'. Within the AWU, however, a movement was afoot 'to persuade these men to join unions' and to educate them to be 'good unionists'.²⁶ The phrasing here is typical of leftist rhetoric at the time. They were oblivious to the fact that many Chinese workers were already well acquainted with the principles of unionism.

One leftist critic wrote in 1921 regarding proposals to introduce Chinese indentured labour, commenting:

But surely it must be apparent to everyone that the day of this class of labor is fast disappearing and will soon be only history of the dark past.

The article spoke of China, India, Japan, and the Philippines and described their 'awakening' and their 'struggle to free themselves from the shackles of bondage'.²⁷

The *Northern Standard* ran an article titled 'Printers' Strike, Yankee Sailors Scab on Chinese' describing how American navy sailors were used to break a printers' strike in Shanghai. The article reported that 'The Chinese printers had gone out in sympathy with the general strike proclaimed as a protest against the massacre of students on May 30, 1925'.²⁸ This image of

²⁶*Northern Standard*, 27 August 1921.

²⁷*Northern Standard*, 15 September 1921.

²⁸*Northern Standard*, 4 March 1927.

whites as strikebreakers and Chinese as strikers provided a perfect antidote to White Australian stereotyping. Similarly in 1922, the *Standard*, printed details of a Chinese strike in which 'Chinese seafaring men' successfully negotiated a wage increase to £4 per week despite losing several workers in a violent confrontation with British troops in Hong Kong. The article typifies the emergent Australian internationalism:

It is in shipping that the white worker finds himself directly in competition with the Asiatic. The competition will be fatal to white seafarers, unless the pay of the two races can be fairly nearly equalised. You cannot put exclusion walls around the ocean or secure a monopoly of trade routes by tariff barriers. ... Western Workers obviously had much to gain from this strike of Chinese — so much that one might almost have expected the racial cleavage to be forgotten. But, as in South Africa, Labour is divided against itself. White workers shipped on the steamer *St. Albans* at Sydney, in place of striking Chinese. One recollects, in contrast, how a Chinese crew in New Zealand refused to break a strike of white watersiders. Men from the crews of four small British warships took the place of Chinese strikers on the liner '*Cyclops*', at Hongkong. Thus did the working class assist the employers ...²⁹

To any Darwin unionist reading this article it must have been apparent that the Chinese unionists were no less militant than Australian workers and equally, that white workers were failing to support 'class struggle'.³⁰

The influence of left-wing ideology may have improved union attitudes towards Chinese workers, but in Darwin it was of little practical benefit while the union continued to exclude them from membership. When the NAWU was registered in 1927, they retained the membership rules which had pertained to the AWU, that:

Full membership shall consist of all bona-fide workers in the Northern Territory ... PROVIDED that no person who is a Chinese, Japanese, Kanaka, or Afghan, or who belongs to any colored race shall be admitted to membership ...

²⁹'Chinese Seamen Win a Strike', *Northern Standard*, 25 July 1922.

³⁰For a discussion of Hong Kong unionism in this period see Levin, David A., & Chiu, Stephen W. K., 'Trade Union Growth Waves in Hong Kong', *Labour History*, no. 75, November 1998, pp. 40-56.

Shortly after, however, as has been discussed in Chapter 4, communist unionists began to lobby on behalf of the Chinese.

The NAWU members voted at the 1928 Annual Meeting on the motion that 'any coloured person born in Australia who has passed a 3rd class school examination standard be admitted to membership'. One third of the voters were in favour of this amendment to the rules. Significantly, the wording of the motion was not as the Communist Party had advocated. The NAWU was prepared to remove the 'race' distinction from the rules, but not prepared to abandon the assumption that only those born and educated in Australia were capable of making good unionists. This stance, however, was helpful to the Chinese, the majority of whom were now Australian-born.

Chinese nationalism

Any discussion of the changing relationship between the Australian labour movement and the Chinese community must take into account the changes which occurred within the Chinese community itself in this period. Jan Ryan, writing in *Creating Australia*, echoes Jennifer Cushmann's plea for historians to 'relocate the Chinese experience with the Chinese community itself'.³¹ The 1920s saw the emergence of a 'modern' young generation of Chinese in Australia. The Wah On society in Darwin, which was comprised of older merchants, whose values and customs tended to be those of traditional China, was gradually overshadowed by the new political society, the Kuomintang. Representing 'modern' China, the Darwin Kuomintang was a branch of the Australasian Chinese Nationalist Party which was first established in Sydney in 1920.³² The young members of Darwin's Kuomintang were quite different in ideology from the older Chinese. They were prominent in public debates over issues such as workers' and women's rights, rejecting many 'traditional' Chinese views and taking up a 'modern' stance.

The increasing importance of the Kuomintang was an Australia-wide phenomenon. In Darwin, the president of the Wah On society, Ah Cheong, was replaced as leader of the Chinese community in the 1920s, and his role was taken over by the executive members of the Kuomintang.³³ By 1930, the

³¹Jennifer Cushmann cited in Jan Ryan, 'Chinese Australian History', in Wayne Hudson and Geoffrey Bolton (eds.), *Changing Australian History, Creating Australia*, Allen & Unwin, St Leonards, 1997, p. 75.

³²Shirley Fitzgerald, *Red Tape, Gold Scissors, The Story of Sydney's Chinese*, State Library of New South Wales Press, Sydney, 1997, pp. 113-14.

³³Helen Wilson, 'Ah Cheong', *Northern Territory Dictionary of Biography, Volume Three*, D. Carment and H. Wilson (eds.), NTU Press, Darwin, 1996, p. 3-4.

Kuomintang was responsible for almost all social, political and financial functions, including the provision of loans to the Chinese community.³⁴ The Darwin situation was similar to that of Perth, where in 1921, the Kuomintang effectively replaced the older Chung Wah Association.³⁵ In Sydney, there was a similar conflict between the conservative Chinese Chamber of Commerce and the Nationalists, while in Melbourne in 1920, the Nationalists successfully took control of the Victorian Chamber of Commerce.³⁶ By 1927, the Adelaide Branch claimed that 80 per cent of adult Chinese residents in Australia were financial members of the Kuomintang.³⁷ In 1929 there were 40 branches throughout Australia.³⁸

The upsurge of Chinese nationalism, however, did not necessarily exclude its members from feeling a sense of Australian nationalism. A Darwin member of the Kuomintang, Charlie Houg On, suggested that they felt a sense of dual citizenship and loyalty. He wrote in 1932:

Many of us are Australian by birth, others are Australian by adoption; and though we are proud of our Chinese Nationality, and of being members of the oldest civilization that the world has to show, we are also proud of the land of our adoption ...³⁹

Their stance was clearly nationalistic, but it was a type of nationalism that has more in common with Australia's present day multicultural nationalism.

This notion of dual nationality was supported by the conservative Administrator, Colonel Robert Weddell. At a Kuomintang celebration in 1931 to mark the 20th anniversary of the Chinese Republic, Weddell gave his sanction to the Chinese association:

He had been asked why should the Australian born Chinese have such a society as the Kuo Min Tang and he had replied that just as the English had their society of St. George, the Irishman the Hibernian Society and the Scotchman the Caledonian Society, so

³⁴Darwin Local Court, *Northern Standard*, 20 March 1931. Note that Arthur Lee was the treasurer at this time.

³⁵Anne Atkinson, in Paul Macgregor (ed.), *Histories of the Chinese in Australasia and the South Pacific*, Museum of Chinese Australian History, Melbourne, 1995, p. 43.

³⁶Fitzgerald, *Red Tape*, p. 114; C.F. Yong, *The New Gold Mountain, The Chinese in Australia, 1901-1921*, Raphael Arts, Richmond, South Australia, 1977, p. 88.

³⁷'The Chinese Question', *Adelaide Observer*, reprinted in *Northern Standard*, 28 January 1927.

³⁸Letter to the Editor by 'Double Ten' in *Northern Standard*, 18 October 1929.

³⁹Charlie Houg On, Kuo Min Tang to Minister for the Interior, 5 July 1932, A1/15 32/2186, AA ACT.

should the Chinese be entitled to have their society and he hoped the Kuo Min Tang will continue to flourish...

The attendance of the Administrator, and the Mayor, J. Brogan at this celebration was significant. During the proceedings the Chinese sang the Chinese National Anthem and the Chairman Chin Mong made a patriotic speech, stating that

exactly 20 years ago, the great Republic of China came into being, and the richest and most populous country in the world, broke the chains of slavery and oppression it had endured for so many centuries, and set its people on the high road to peace, prosperity, and equality among the other nations of the world.

His speech was translated into English by Mrs Hassan for the benefit of the white audience. This display of solidarity, however, had a more pragmatic motivation. They were also there to welcome back to Darwin Lee Sing, who was returning to take over Man Fong Lau and Co. Lee Sing had been successful in his business ventures in Hong Kong and had approached the Darwin business community with offers to improve Darwin's export trade.⁴⁰ Eric Rolls has suggested that the Kuomintang was regarded as snobbish. This example of their alliance with the 'silvertails' might have encouraged such criticism. Nevertheless, it was the education of its members and their capital advantage that enabled the Kuomintang to develop as a strong political force.⁴¹

Interestingly, when it came to attitudes towards the Japanese community in Darwin, the older merchants in the Wah On Society were more tolerant than the younger Kuomintang members. In the 1930s, after a partial victory of the Chinese over the Japanese, the Kuomintang asked the Wah On Society to celebrate with flags and fire-crackers. Chin Ack Ming, manager of Fang Chong Loong and secretary of the Wah On Society responded stating 'we were in Australia and not in China, and members did not like to fly flags on business premises as there was a lot of Japanese in town'.⁴² It is likely, of course, that this diplomatic tone was guided by

⁴⁰'20th Anniversary of Chinese Republic', *Northern Standard*, 13 October 1931; 'Man Fong Lau and Co's Store', *Northern Standard*, 6 October 1931.

⁴¹Eric Rolls, *Sojourners: The Epic Story of China's Centuries-Old Relationship with Australia: Flowers and the Wide Sea*, St Lucia, University of Queensland Press, 1992, p. 447 and p. 255.

⁴²Members of the KMT were Chin Mon Di, President; Selina Hassan, Secretary; Committee members included Arthur Lee, Yee Hong On, Lew Wah, Leung Soo, Leung Sing. 'Darwin Police Court', *Northern Standard*, 8 April 1932.

business pragmatism. Nevertheless, the irony remained that as Chinese-born, the Chinese merchants appeared less patriotic towards China than their Australian-born children.

The Kuomintang on workers' rights

It would be wrong to assume that the Kuomintang was merely an organisation for capitalists with no concern for the rights of workers. Admittedly, since the death of Sun Yat-sen in 1925, the Kuomintang in China had come to depend upon political repression as it lost popular support.⁴³ Nevertheless, their ideology remained democratic in theory. In 1929 the consul-general for China argued that the Kuomintang had only 'assumed the role of 'Dictator' ... during the period of 'training' or 'guardianship through which the people should go in their effort toward complete democracy'.⁴⁴ Whatever the political reality, the theoretical stance of the Nationalists rested on a principal of egalitarianism which was fundamentally different from the rigid class distinction of Manchu rule.

In Darwin, the wide gap between the wealthy merchants and 'coolie' labourers was typical of the hierarchical social structure that prevailed in traditional China. For example, in 1921, several merchants wrote to the Commonwealth government requesting permission to 'indent suitable labor from China for the purpose of working mines, and growing cotton, rice or other tropical products'. The suitable labour they referred to was 'coolie' labour, to be brought out under the indentured system, a system notorious for forcing workers to endure slave-like conditions.⁴⁵

In contrast, the new Nationalist government in Canton was in favour of workers' rights and in 1922 they were the first to legalise trade unions in China.⁴⁶ In Australia, the Kuomintang also had links with unionism. At the 1920 Chinese Nationalist Convention in Sydney, an address was delivered by Jock Garden who was both a Communist and a member of the Sydney Trades Hall.⁴⁷ In Darwin, the Kuomintang were similarly critical of conservative attitudes towards workers. Gee Ming Ket wrote:

⁴³Lloyd E. Eastman, 'Nationalist China during the Nanking Decade, 1927-1937', in Lloyd Eastman et al. *The Nationalist Era in China, 1927-1949*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1991, pp. 1, 23.

⁴⁴Rolls, *Sojourners*, p. 451.

⁴⁵Deputation from Darwin Merchants to Poynton, Minister of State for Home & Territories, 4 June 1921, A1/15 1931/8945, AA ACT.

⁴⁶London *Sunday Worker*, cited in *Northern Standard*, 20 May 1927.

⁴⁷Fitzgerald, *Red Tape*, pp. 113-14.

Thankful are we that the majority of young Australian-born Chinese are joining our Society but the old Conservative Chinese are naturally opposed to any change. When did the Conservatives of any country do any real and permanent good for the working classes? The Conservative Chinese — like all other Conservatives — hate change. That sort of conservatism has held China in bonds of slavery for centuries.⁴⁸

The advent of the Darwin branch of the Kuomintang played a significant role in raising the profile of the Chinese workers. In 1928, a meeting was held at the Blue Bird Cafe, chaired by Gee Ming Ket, the president of the Kuomintang. They had invited Harold Nelson, who was the Northern Territory member for Parliament to the meeting and noted that this was the first time that a candidate for Parliament had addressed an exclusively Chinese meeting.⁴⁹ Nelson, as the founder of the Darwin AWU, was taking on a new role as representative of the Chinese community. The issues addressed at the meeting included the issuing of passports for travel to China, and the regulations which prevented Chinese wives from coming to live in Australia permanently. On the subject of union membership, the young Chinese expressed their desire to join the AWU.

An Australian-born Chinese, F. Foo, asked Nelson if he favoured Chinese being admitted to the AWU. Nelson replied that 'if he were dictator he would throw open the union to all Australian-born' and that the NAWU was taking a vote to amend the membership rules. Foo's speech suggests that the young Chinese were well acquainted with the ideology of Australian unionism and its fear of competition. He argued that by excluding them from the union, they had been

compelled to enslave ourselves in breaking down Australian conditions, face starvation, or ask for Government maintenance. We are greatly in need of Government protection, because we are born here and have no intention to leave the country except on holidays, because this is our home.⁵⁰

The rhetoric of White Australia is being repeated here by the very victims of that policy, but in such a way as to gain the sympathy and cooperation of

⁴⁸*Northern Standard*, 11 October 1929.

⁴⁹*Northern Territory Times*, 25 September 1928.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*

Nelson. The NAWU vote revealed that at that time only one third of the unionists were in favour of allowing Chinese membership — this being nevertheless a substantial vote of support.⁵¹

There is evidence that the Kuomintang in Darwin were also supportive of the communists. According to Henry Lee, during the demonstrations of 1930, the young men of his family joined in showing in solidarity with the unionists. The Lee family were prominent members of the Kuomintang and their grandmother was unhappy that they chose to support the union.⁵² Given the conflict between the Nationalists and the Communists in China, it is interesting that the young Darwin Chinese were able to establish a kind of united front with the communists.

Despite this defeat in 1928, the Kuomintang members continued to support the NAWU, in particular those communist activists who had supported their cause. During the 1930 unemployment demonstrations, the Chinese, and indeed the rest of the 'coloured' community came out in support of the communist lobby. It should be noted, however, that the communist activities of 1930 tended to be more community-based and many so-called Depression communists did not continue with the CPA in later years.

The unionist activities of the Darwin Kuomintang tended to alienate them from Darwin's more conservative Chinese employers. In 1932, the merchants criticised the younger generation and asked that the government allow them to import assistants directly from China. They wrote:

It is regretted that the younger Australian born Chinese in Darwin are not proving suitable for responsible employment in this direction because they do not possess the required Chinese education... ⁵³

In fact, a great number of the young Chinese **had** been educated in China, but clearly, their education had not fitted them for a 'responsible' position in the eyes of the conservatives. Their modern views on workers made them a threat to traditional business practice.

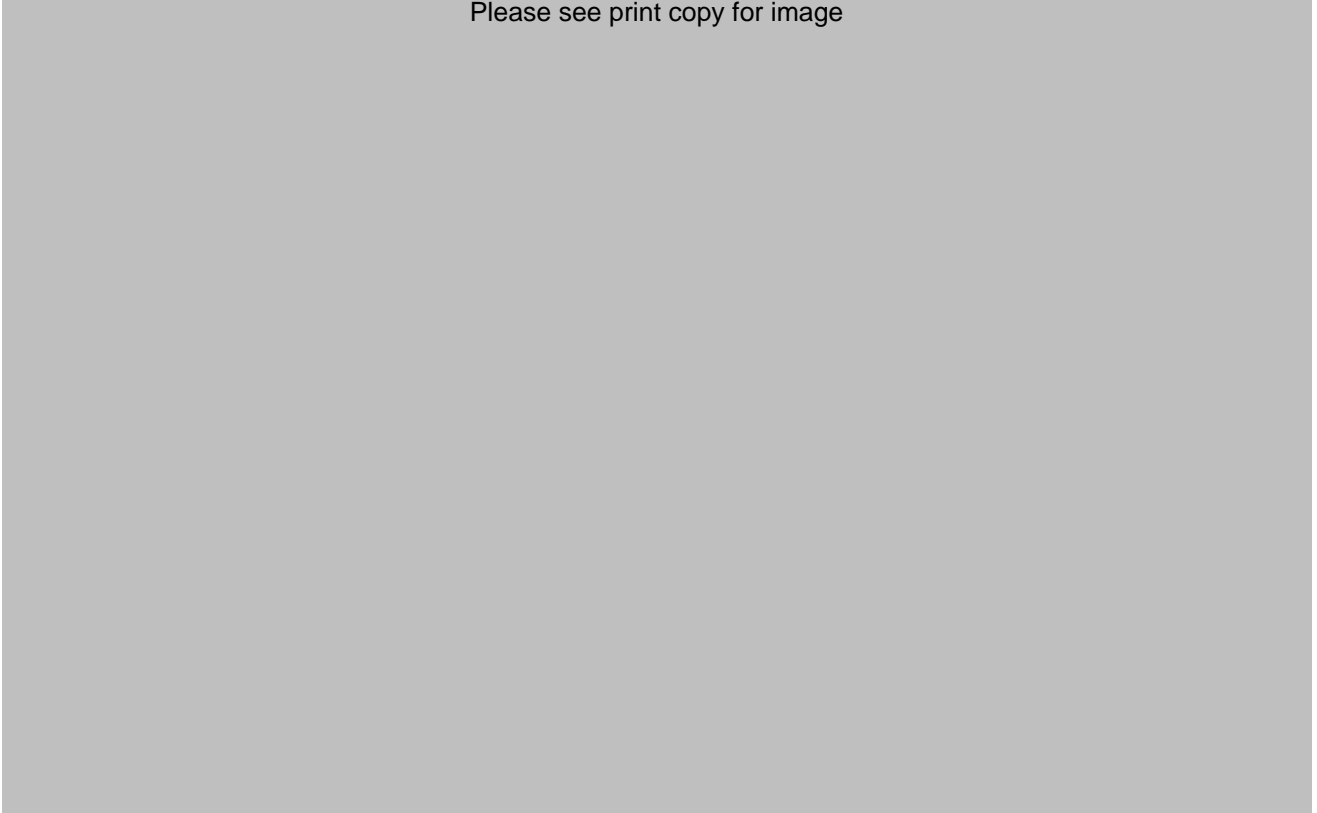
⁵¹*Workers' Weekly*, 13 April 1928.

⁵²Transcript of Interview with Henry Lee, by S. Saunders, 9 April 1981, NTRS 226 TS 261, p. 18, NTAS.

⁵³Ah Cheong and other Chinese residents to H. Nelson, 15 August 1932, A1/15 38/2599, AA ACT.

Wedding Group, 1930.
(PH0238/2055, Spillet Collection, Northern Territory Library)

Please see print copy for image



L-R Standing: Charlie Yuen, Chong Moong, Willy Lee, Tommy Ming Ket, Kown Ling (Cairns), Philip Lee. L-R Seated: Ruby Hassan (D'Ambrosia), Mrs Selina Hassan, Lucy Lee, Mrs Lee (Man Fong Lau), Lilian Yuen (Chen). Small boy - Leslie Wong.

'Modern' Chinese women

Another issue on which the young Kuomintang members differed from conservative Chinese and apparently leaned towards western models was in regard to women's rights.⁵⁴ Gee Ming Ket of the Darwin Kuomintang, criticised the conservatives in 1929 stating: 'They hate to see liberty and freedom being granted to Chinese women — they even hate to see Chinese wives and daughters enjoying a little fresh air or outdoor recreation.'⁵⁵ The Darwin branch of the Kuomintang was organised and led by a woman. Lena Pak Fong, or Lena Lee after her marriage in 1924, had been educated at the University of Hong Kong and was one of the new generation of 'modern' Chinese women and a devoted follower of Sun Yat-sen. Her father was Yam Yan, a prominent Darwin merchant.⁵⁶ Gee Ming Ket described Lena as 'a highly respected and very clever lady'. She was the Darwin delegate at the 1929 Kuomintang conference in Sydney.⁵⁷ Lena's case was not typical however. A 1923 photograph of the Office Bearers of the Chinese Nationalist Party, taken in Melbourne, shows 37 young men and only one woman.⁵⁸

The emancipation of Chinese women, however, did nothing to improve their relationship with the Darwin unionists. When Lena came under attack from the conservative Chinese the *Northern Standard* took up their complaints, commenting that

the old Conservative Chinese of Darwin will have nothing to do with this association whose chief say-so is a woman. Rightly it is pointed out that these people do not represent Chinese manners and thought'.⁵⁹

It is ironic that a workers' paper chose to support the Chinese conservatives in this manner, but one should not be surprised as the NAWU was an almost exclusively male domain.

On the other hand, the conservative *Northern Territory Times*, came to Lena Lee's defence writing:

⁵⁴Jessie Litchfield, 'Press Collect', unpublished manuscript, Litchfield Papers, MS 132, p. 2, National Library of Australia (NAL).

⁵⁵*Northern Standard*, 11 October 1929.

⁵⁶Barbara James, *No Man's Land, Women of the Northern Territory*, Collins Publishers Australia, Sydney, 1989, p. 122.

⁵⁷*Northern Standard*, 11 October 1929.

⁵⁸C.F. Yong, *The New Gold Mountain*, p. 155.

⁵⁹*Northern Standard*, 8 October 1929.

Believing that the emancipation of her country was imminent, she has fearlessly advocated the absolutely knocking out of foreign capitalists from China. We have lady members of parliament in Australia and the Imperial Parliament possesses nine lady members ... Are these women out of place? If not, what is wrong with a Chinese woman emulating her western sisters and trying to assist her lesser educated brethren? ⁶⁰

Tragically, in 1930, a few months after, the strain of confrontation proved too great and Lena Lee committed suicide.⁶¹ Despite her apparent failure to win popular support from the white unionists at the very least her untimely death must have given them pause. This incident is a reminder that the Australian labour movement at that time was very much a movement for white male workers and that in some cases, the so-called 'conservatives', might have been more progressive, or liberal, in regards to issues of 'race' and gender. Even so, the suggestion remained that Lena Lee had been imitating her 'western' sisters, implying that 'western' was synonymous with educated, and conversely that to be 'eastern' was to be backward.

Cultural assimilation

A travelier, Hoskins, after a trip to Darwin in 1919, observed the changes in the Chinese community describing, with approval, the way in which they were becoming 'Australianised'. He spoke of the young Australian Chinese who were becoming assimilated by the school system which taught 'scholars of all colors and creeds to read from the same books, in the same languages, the same lessons with the object of making them worthy citizens of Australia'.⁶² He pointed to the tendency to adopt Australia dress, sports and pastimes. He painted a picture of the old 'evils' of Chinese culture being rejected by young Chinese Australians. Noting the increasing number of foreigners in Darwin, he wondered 'how long our White Australia Policy can last, and whether, in regard to the vast unpopulated fringe of the North, it is wise that it should.'

Hoskins was voicing a powerful new argument against White Australia and its belief in the inherent difference between the 'races'. His representation of Chinese as 'worthy citizens of Australia' was a radical

⁶⁰Cited in Barbara James, *No Man's Land*, p.122.

⁶¹*Ibid.*

⁶²'Sidelights on Tropical Australia', *Northern Territory Times*, 24 May 1919, reprinted from the Sydney *Sunday Times*.

departure from previous images and signalled the beginning of a new, assimilationist vision of Australia. While today we may reject this vision as eurocentric, it nevertheless represented an important step on the path from exclusion to our present multiculturalism. This step is usually associated with the post-war immigration program, giving rise to the convenient but misleading notion that 1945 was the beginning of a new Australian era. Had it not been for the jingoistic attitude of Prime Minister Hughes, it is likely that this view would have been more widely supported.⁶³

On the other hand, Hughes had supporters such as G. F Pearce who argued against assimilation in 1917 stating:

While we make every effort to keep colored people out of the Commonwealth and deny them naturalization, our law confers the full rights of a British citizen on their children who happen to be born within our territory — a result wholly obnoxious to Australian sentiment.⁶⁴

Overall, as this chapter demonstrates, attitudes towards Chinese were wide-ranging, including both extremes of exclusion and inclusion.

An important factor in the so-called Chinese assimilation into Australian culture was their shift towards Christianity. In fact, this shift, like their new attitude towards women, was not simply a question of assimilation but of the influence of 'modern' China. The Kuomintang, supported by mainland China, were instrumental in encouraging the Chinese towards Christianity.⁶⁵ In the 1911 census, most Chinese gave their religion as Confucianism but by 1933 only 4 per cent followed Chinese traditions, though it was quite common for people to attend both church and temple.⁶⁶ One example of this change was that young Kuomintang members were now married in the Catholic Church with executive members acting as best man and speech-giver.⁶⁷ On the other hand, the traditional Wah On Society continued to organise fireworks for Chinese New Year.⁶⁸

⁶³Piesse, 'Papers prepared in the Pacific Branch in connection with the Geneva assembly of the League of Nations - the White Australia policy'. This report, which suggested softening the White Australia policy, was annotated by Prime Minister William Hughes with the word 'rot'. 27 March 1919, Piesse Papers, MS 882/2/42-3 NLA.

⁶⁴Pearce to Glynn, Minister for Home and Territories, 30 May 1917, Piesse Papers, MS 882/2/15, NLA.

⁶⁵Dr. T. P. Woo, from Hong Kong, speaking in Sydney, *Northern Standard*, 11 March 1927; Reverend Lo arrived from Guangdong province to promote his faith, see Giese, *Beyond Chinatown*, p. 17.

⁶⁶Giese, *Beyond Chinatown*, pp. 43-4.

⁶⁷*Northern Standard*, 12 January 1926, 17 April 1931.

⁶⁸'The Chinese Question: A plea for mutual understanding', *Adelaide Observer*, reprinted in *Northern Standard*, 28 January 1927; *Northern Standard*, 11 February 1927.

Segregated schooling?

While Hoskins may have regarded the integration of Chinese and European as a positive step, there were still some in Darwin who favoured segregation. Segregation was already clear in Darwin society, particularly in the divisions in the cinema seating. Segregation in schooling, however, was a particular contentious issue. In 1912, a deputation of white residents requested a separate white school. Their request was only partially met with the creation of a separate school for Aboriginal children.⁶⁹ Again in 1925 and 1926, a group of 26 white parents petitioned the federal government to have Darwin State School reorganised so as to separate the white children from the 'coloured'. Harold Nelson, in his capacity as member for parliament, agreed with the petitioners that it was time that steps were taken to separate white and coloured' races in the school as the present system had 'a tendency to degrade the white children'.⁷⁰ Fannie Bell had written:

Such a pity to see all the little white children sitting and playing with our coloured races and I am sure, you quite understand a Mother's feelings. Yesterday I went along, the school infants giving a small concert, and to see the few white children dancing with the Chinese was too much for me — So dear Mr. Nelson I ask you kindly to do what you can for our dear little ones to be separated, even if we must have more teachers to teach them ...⁷¹

Despite their petition, neither Senator Pearce in 1925, nor T. W. Glasgow in 1926 were prepared to approve the segregation of the school.⁷²

The government report on the subject noted that there were 44 white, 66 Chinese and 11 'quadroon' and 'half-caste' children at the Darwin school. Only 26 signatures were appended to the petition, some of whom were parents of children at the Catholic Convent. The latter commented that they felt that the convent was a safer environment despite the fact that it too was a mixed school.⁷³ This petition could be regarded as evidence of segregationist tendencies within the Darwin community, but on the other

⁶⁹Deputation from Residents of Darwin, 6 May 1912, A1/15 1912/10548, AA ACT.

⁷⁰H. G. Nelson cited in Memorandum, Home and Territories Department, 22 July 1926, A1/15 38/10188, AA ACT.

⁷¹Fannie Bell to Nelson, 5 June 1926, A1/15 38/10188, AA ACT.

⁷²T. W. Glasgow, to H. G. Nelson, M.P. Parliament House, 30 July 1926, A1/15 38/10188, AA ACT.

⁷³Maude Allwright to Head Teacher, Mr. Lampe, 28 August 1925, A1/15 38/10188, AA ACT.

hand, of the 88 white parents, some twenty signatures can hardly be considered a majority voice. Interestingly, two of the women who lobbied for segregated schooling were also involved in Darwin's Anglican church.⁷⁴

Writing in 1925, Frederick Charles Urquhart, the Administrator of the Northern Territory, wrote against the proposed segregation. He had been the Queensland Commissioner of Police during the Red Flag riots in Brisbane.⁷⁵ He argued that:

The Chinese pupils are born in Australia, the children of naturalized or native parents who are taxpayers and ratepayers and equal before the law in all respects with white residents. ... Thus prima facie these children are entitled to share equally in all State educational advantages. Past action as to the naturalization of aliens has rendered it inevitable that a native Chinese population must grow up at Darwin beside the white and figures indicate that the rate of natural increase points to a future numerical preponderance of Chinese. In these circumstances the question arises whether the amicable relations of the whole community in the future would be more likely to be promoted by association of the children of both races in the Schools and whether separation as urged by the petitioners might not tend to the accentuation of racial differences with unfortunate effects on the general peace.

Against this is the ingrained prejudice of the white parents against the association of their children with those of coloured parentage. I understand the prejudice but cannot say that it should rightly be regarded as a governing factor in the situation.

At Thursday Island, which offers a parallel case in this direction, Chinese and Japanese children who attend the State School are taught with the white pupils and pass freely on to the secondary schools of Queensland and I am reliably informed that the Chinese established their rights in the matter in the Queensland Courts.⁷⁶

⁷⁴Diocese of Carpentaria, Year Book, 1927/1928, Miss Finnis and Miss Allwright appear as SS. Supt. and Organist respectively. British Library.

⁷⁵Raymond Evans, *The Red Flag Riots, A Study of Intolerance*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1988, p. 45.

⁷⁶Urquhart, Administrator, to Secretary, Home and Territories Department, Melbourne, 8 September 1925, A1/15 38/10188, AA ACT.

Urquhart's attitude was somewhat pragmatic in nature, but nevertheless, by emphasising the citizenship rights of the Chinese community he was a step ahead of Nelson. Given Nelson's apparent support for the Chinese in 1928 he was clearly uncertain as to where his loyalties lay. Nevertheless, in 1929 he confirmed his support of Urquhart's position, arguing in parliament that the rights of Australian-born Chinese should be respected and stating: 'It is wrong to discriminate between Australians; indeed, I believe it to be unconstitutional.'⁷⁷

This new emphasis on the citizenship rights of Chinese Australians had serious implications for the White Australia policy. During the 1901 debate, one of the main concerns was to supposedly protect white society from the adverse effects of a permanent 'Asiatic' population. Apart from the issue of labour competition, White Australians imagined that there were social risks inherent in living alongside Chinese, such as the supposedly degenerative effect of miscegenation, the risk of disease, and their supposedly immoral influence. These spectres were being raised in this 1926 debate. The government, however, were prepared to not only ignore the White Australian protest, but had gone so far as to argue that 'ingrained prejudice' should not be considered a 'governing factor'. Given that the entire premise for the government policy of White Australia was precisely that prejudice, there had clearly been a change of opinion.

The only argument which gave rise to concern in the government report was the question of health. The report stated:

The petitioners represent that the present absence of any discrimination is highly undesirable for many reasons the most prominent being those of health and morals, the Asiatic races not having the same regard to hygiene as European.

This provoked a scribbled note on the report to the effect that they should have the Health Authorities look into the question of hygiene.⁷⁸

⁷⁷Nelson in House of Representatives, 14 March 1929, *CPD*, Volume 120, p.1254; see also letter from Nelson, 29 January 1925, Latham Papers, MS 1009, Item 25/3503, NLA.

⁷⁸The government decision was not necessarily motivated by economics. The proposed changes would have cost £155 and an additional teacher at £320 per annum, but this factor was quickly dismissed in the face of the more important legal and social ramifications. Memorandum, Home and Territories Department, 25 November 1925, A1/15 38/10188, AA ACT.

Segregation in Sport?

From the 1920s onwards, western sports such as Australian Rules football, soccer, and cycling became popular among the Darwin Chinese. According to the agenda laid out for the Chinese Nationalist Party in 1921 the Kuomintang supported a program of physical fitness for Chinese citizens. Their goal was to 'help the physical development of such residents by establishing gymnasiums and encouraging other forms of physical exercise.'⁷⁹ An emphasis on youth sporting associations was a common factor in nationalist programs of this era as it encouraged strong citizens and a sense of group identity. A 1923 photograph shows the Darwin Chinese Soccer Team organised by a body called the Darwin Chinese Recreation Club.⁸⁰ This Club was affiliated to the Darwin Kuomintang, sharing the same executive members.⁸¹

Diana Giese discusses the significance of the founding of this Club in the overall picture of the Chinese in Australian society. She criticises the assessment by Cross written in 1956. Cross describes the Chinese involvement in sport as evidence of their 'assimilation' into Australian society. Reflecting the 1950s belief in monoculturalism, she attributed the forming of the Chinese Recreation Club to the 'breaking down of Chinese exclusivism and encouraging social and sporting contact with the rest of the population'.⁸² Giese rejects this, arguing instead that the Club was formed in reaction to white segregationist policies when the Chinese were allegedly banned from white sporting clubs.⁸³ In fact, her evidence for segregation is taken from a much later incident. The problem with both these interpretations is that they assume that white Australian influences were the catalyst for Chinese action. If in fact the Recreation Club was a Chinese initiative, prompted by the Kuomintang, then it would be inappropriate to assume white involvement.

Nevertheless, the issue of segregation in sport is clearly important. As illustrated in previous chapters, the 'racial' attitudes of the working class in Darwin cannot be fully understood without reference to sport. Opinion on segregation in sport was clearly divided in Darwin. Not all considerations of

⁷⁹Memorandum and Articles of Association of the Chinese Nationalist Party of Australasia, 1921, C. Yong, *The New Gold Mountain*, p. 268.

⁸⁰Giese, *Beyond Chinatown*, p. 35.

⁸¹*Northern Standard*, 28 January, 6 May 1927.

⁸²J. Cross, A Survey of Darwin's Social History 1868-1856, with Particular Emphasis on the Growth of a Provincial Society, B.A. Honours thesis, University of Adelaide, 1956, p. 135.

⁸³Giese, *Beyond Chinatown*, p. 36. In fact, her evidence is taken from the later period and she does not adequately explain the existence of segregationism in the 1920s.

Chinese sporting activities were aimed at segregation. In 1922 the Town Council considered a complaint by Councillor Finniss that the Chinese were playing on the Tennis Court on Sundays. The complaint was aimed at preserving the Christian tradition of observing the 'sabbath'. Finniss, however, was firmly opposed in his proposal by the other councillors, who could not see the harm in anyone playing tennis on a Sunday.⁸⁴

As was discussed in Chapter seven, in 1926 a group of white players forced the introduction of a white-only football League, the NAFL, and banned all 'coloured' players from the field.⁸⁵ Up until that time there had been a few Chinese players in the mixed football teams. The public meeting to discuss the problem of racial prejudice in football was led by key NAWU figures, communist M. Mahoney and Laborites Harold Nelson and Bob Murray. Nelson stated: 'I do not know why the colour line should be drawn', he said. ... 'I know of nowhere else other than the N.T. where such a bar existed. It appeared as though certain persons desired to set up a similar state of affairs as existed in Singapore, where everything socially was based on colour and caste.'⁸⁶ The segregationist push, then, was not coming from the unionists. A letter to the editor in 1928 called those who supported white-only football the 'silvertail football clique', and dismissed them as 'nothing more than birds of passage' who were out 'to dictate to the public of Darwin who have spent their lives here'.⁸⁷ The suggestion, therefore, was that segregation was favoured by the elite southerners who were reflecting a culture of caste hierarchy which the local working class rejected. Having failed to support the issue of Chinese women, the union was full of enthusiasm for the issue of Chinese football players.

The new white-only football league was renamed the North Australian Football League (NAFL). In response to the segregationist policy of the NAFL, those in favour of 'mixed' sport planned to form a soccer league with two Chinese, one white and one 'half-caste' team.⁸⁸ The decision to make the teams 'racially' based was most likely due to the fact that the Chinese Soccer teams were already in existence. The new Soccer Association however, had to contend with racism within the Darwin council. In 1927, Tommy (Gee) Ming Ket, who was named secretary of the Darwin Soccer Association, wrote to the Darwin council for use of the oval

⁸⁴'Council Meeting', *Northern Standard*, 1 August 1922.

⁸⁵'NT Football League', suggesting that the oval be restricted to 'whites', *Northern Standard*, 12 November 1926.

⁸⁶'Readmittance of coloured players', *Northern Standard*, 11 December 1928.

⁸⁷'The Football Trouble', *Northern Standard*, 18 December 1928.

⁸⁸*Northern Standard*, 7 January 1927.

on Saturday afternoons. He was told that the NAFL had the oval and they would have to apply to them for permission. Councillor Watts was asked by Ming Ket to refrain from voting as he was biased 'insofar as he was a delegate who voted for the exclusion of all colored and Australian born Chinese players.' He explained that the Soccer Association had three teams and 50 players and he pointed out that as ratepayers they could not be barred from using the oval. Councillors Marchant and Watts were highly antagonistic and commented that the letter was dictatorial and the request impossible. Councillor Watts said, regarding Ming Ket, that he 'did not give a snap of his finger for him'.⁸⁹

The position taken by Watts was criticised by local unionists, despite the fact that Watts had been one of the original members of the AWU in Darwin and had worked closely with Nelson and Toupein during the Darwin Rebellion.⁹⁰ Evidently there was some difference of opinion between unionists as to their attitude towards the Chinese. A letter to the editor from 'Fairplay' suggested that the Council should have given the Soccer players 'a fair go'. Making the connection between sport and the labour movement, 'Fairplay' criticised the 'silvertails' in the new white League, stating that the men in the NAFL have 'not yet realised that 'Union is Strength'. In any case, the NAFL did agree to allow the Soccer players the use of the oval.⁹¹ The first teams to play were the Waratahs, a team of 'half-caste' players who went up against the Chinese Darwin Recreation Club.⁹²

The segregation of Darwin football lasted for only one year, after which, with the support of union lobbying, the mixed teams were restored. In 1933, the Wanderers football team included white and 'half-caste' players and two Chinese, H. and A. Jan.⁹³ The younger generation of Chinese were similarly involved in community sport. The Town football team, for junior players, was captained by H. Chin and included several other Chinese including the Moo boys who were of Hakka origin.⁹⁴

The Chinese were not only players, but financial supporters of Darwin football, with Ernie Lee being described at his funeral in 1932 as 'a good sport

⁸⁹*Northern Standard*, 28 January 1927.

⁹⁰Helen Wilson, 'Watts, Douglas Crombie (Jim) (1884-1930)', in David Carment and Barbara James (eds.), *Northern Territory Dictionary of Biography, Volume Two*, NTU Press, Darwin, 1992, pp. 223-225.

⁹¹NAFL members include Bowman as president, C. M. Clark as Vice-President, and team delegates Olsen, McKittrick, Conigrave, O'Leary, Osborne and McGaffin, *Northern Standard*, 4 February 1927.

⁹²The Chinese players were W. Lee, A. Jan, P. Jan, W. Jan, J. Ket, J. Lee, T. Lee, A. Fong, C. Fong, Kim Chack, See Pon, Emergencies, Loong Pack, H. Hing, and S. Jan. 'Soccer Football', *Northern Standard*, 4 February 1927.

⁹³*Northern Standard*, 20 January 1933.

⁹⁴'Juvenile Football', *Northern Standard*, 6 March 1931.

and for a number of years was a staunch supporter of Wanderers Football Club'. Lee, who was born in Victoria, was described as a 'well-known and highly respected resident of Darwin'.⁹⁵ His pall bearers were F. Chavez, F. Spain, C. Spain, E. Conanan, A. Cubillo, E. Tapper, and J. Cubillo.⁹⁶ These men, some of whom were white and some of Filipino background, were clearly not linked to Lee through any sense of ethnic or 'racial' kinship. The connection between them was that they were unionists, waterside workers and footballers.⁹⁷ Ernie Lee, being the son of the Chinese merchant, Lee Hang Gong and English woman, Sarah Bowman, was eligible to join the NAWU under the 'mixed descent' clause of its membership rules.⁹⁸ There were several Chinese of mixed descent who were union members including Arthur Tye who worked as a waterside worker. These men provided a direct link between the union and the rest of the Chinese community.

Workers in the 1930s

The final proof that White Australian attitudes towards Chinese workers had undergone a change was their acceptance into the NAWU. While the communist members of the NAWU had consistently lobbied for their inclusion, the Labor members, who were the most influential, continued to reject their proposal. In 1935, however, Robert Toupein, the Labor secretary of the NAWU proposed that they remove the 'colour' bar from their membership rules. During the confusion of the next few years, it is difficult to ascertain when and if the bar was removed, but I believe that all Australian-born workers were allowed membership. What is known for certain, however, is that in January 1940, **before** the communist take-over of the union, there were Chinese members in the NAWU, working as waterside workers. A petition signed by members who supported the Labor executive of the NAWU included names such as C. Yuen, W. Jan, S. Jan, Peter Ng all of whom were Chinese.⁹⁹

The NAWU was not alone in its changed attitude towards Chinese workers. The federal government was similarly inclined to accept Australian-born Chinese as full citizens. In 1936, Charles Que Fong Lee, among 17 other university graduates, was accepted into the Federal Public

⁹⁵'Death of Mr. E. H. Lee', *Northern Standard*, 28 October 1932.

⁹⁶*Northern Standard*, 1 November 1932.

⁹⁷List of Waterside workers in 1937, Abbott to the Department of the Interior, 10 November 1937, F1 1939/68, AA NT.

⁹⁸Barbara James, 'Hang Gong, Lee also Lee Hang Gong (c1836-1907)', in D. Carment and B. James (eds.), *Northern Territory Dictionary of Biography, Volume Two*, NTU Press, Darwin, 1992, pp. 80-82.

⁹⁹'Carry on Executive, Reply to the Disgruntled Few', *Northern Standard*, 9 January 1940.

Service. Charlie Lee had been born and educated in Darwin and had won a scholarship to attend secondary college in Brisbane. From there he had completed a Bachelor of Arts at the University of Queensland.¹⁰⁰ Clearly, by the late 1930s it was becoming increasingly difficult for either the unions or the government to sustain stereotypical images of Chinese 'coolies'. It was only by sheer patience and perseverance, and aided by a few progressive white Australians, that the Chinese community had brought about this transition.

Conclusion

The situation for Chinese workers in Darwin by 1940 had clearly gone through a major change from their initial experience of White Australian hostility in 1911. While the internationalist perspective of the communists played a significant part in changing union attitudes, there were other more important factors. Firstly, during the 1920s the Chinese community itself became more 'modern' under the influence of the Chinese Nationalist Party, the Kuomintang, and its young Australian-born members. With a majority of working-age Chinese being born and raised in Australia, as with any second generation immigrants, there was clearly a degree of assimilation into the Australian culture. Whether we regard this as a positive step or not, it nevertheless altered the position of the Chinese in relation to the government and the union. Both these groups found it increasingly difficult to discriminate against Australian-born citizens regardless of their ethnic background. This is not to say that discrimination did not continue, but it ceased to be promoted as a valid and morally acceptable course of action. As the Chinese came to be regarded as 'locals' the union movement no longer regarded them as an 'alien' presence and gradually came to include them as part of the community in both work and leisure.

¹⁰⁰*Northern Standard*, 22 May 1936; Timothy Jones, *The Chinese in the Northern Territory*, NTU Press, Darwin, 1990, p. 102.

Conclusion

In this thesis I have taken a northern, tropical perspective on 'race' relations, in order to criticise the writing of Australia's national histories. I have argued that southern-oriented histories have implicitly accepted the 'racially'-determined notion that the temperate zones are naturally conducive to white 'settlement' and 'civilisation'. The south has been imagined as the heart of the nation, only because it was the heart of white Australia. As a means of balancing this eurocentric vision, I have attempted to write a history of Plural Australia, by which I mean an ethnically or 'racially' mixed nation. I have provided a detailed analysis of 'race' and labour relations in the northern town of Darwin, focusing on the relationship between Aboriginal and Asian workers, and the white population. The image of mono-ethnic Australia is a powerful myth, made possible only because early nationalist histories were able to ignore the memories of Aboriginal and Asian Australians or to present their stories as being peripheral to those of the 'mainstream' white population.

Since the 1970s, historians have been gradually breaking down this myth, but the dominant paradigm of mainstream Australian history remains essentially that of British 'settler' history. I have sought, in this thesis, to demonstrate that Australia, since colonisation, has always been a plural society, better described as Plural Australia, rather than White Australia. Recognition of this rather obvious fact is crucial to the writing of 'race' relations in Australian history. Colonial Australia cannot be accurately described as a British 'settlement' because at no time was the population of Australia solely British. That colonial Australia was plural has been demonstrated in numerous histories. I have been more concerned, however, to demonstrate that this plurality continued after Federation, into the period designated by the term White Australia.

In popular imagination, twentieth-century Australia did not become plural until after World War II, with the onset of mass-immigration. Even then, the insistence that migrants assimilate into the 'Australian' culture meant that the myth of a homogeneous Australia could be sustained. The implementation of the policy of multiculturalism and its recognition of cultural difference marked the demise of White Australia and the 1970s are usually seen, in historical trajectory, as the beginning of multicultural

Australia. This thesis has shown, however, that from a northern perspective, there never was a period in which the myth of homogeneity could be plausibly sustained. The experience of Darwin's residents was that of a continuously plural society.

In examining contemporary political-ideological perspectives on White Australia, I have sought to demonstrate that White Australia was not only a mythical dream, created by nationalists, but that it was a dream which was questioned by a substantial portion of the white population, for a variety of reasons. Those who favoured the White Australian solution had adopted a strategy of exclusionary nationalism, based on immigration restriction and strict internal segregation and discrimination. They were opposed by anti-White Australian advocates from both the left and right of politics. Those who adopted a left-wing internationalist stance, still tended to favour immigration restriction, but advocated a more inclusive society. They argued for the removal of the 'colour bar' in order to create a more egalitarian Australia. The third group, whom I have referred to as 'colonialists', actively sought to increase Australia's 'coloured' population working on the assumption that 'coloured' labour was inherently 'cheap' labour. They advocated an Australian social structure similar to that of British tropical colonies, in which 'racial' hierarchy would determine status. They were in no way concerned to create an egalitarian society.

Faced with these opposing views, the rhetoric of White Australian advocates continued to be expressed from a position of defence. Its principle exponents were within the Labor Party and its primary unionist organisation, the Australian Workers' Union. Even within these institutions, however, the internal application of White Australia was questioned. For the labour movement, the dream of White Australia had been presented in terms of protecting the interests of white workers. But not everyone agreed that this necessarily involved the ruthless exclusion of non-white workers. Throughout this period there were nationalist White Australians who were moderate in their views, and who preferred to include 'coloured' workers within unions and working-class communities, if only to satisfy themselves that they were upholding the principle of egalitarianism.

The degree of opposition to White Australia has been masked by historians who have tended to concentrate only on the rhetoric of politicians. The creation of White Australia as a uniform and monolithic expression of white Australian attitudes has been further strengthened by New Left historians who sought to highlight past racism. The reductionist

presentation of 'racism' as a single endemic expression of white Australian views has not allowed for a more nuanced discussion of difference within the white population. As a corollary of this position, there has been an assumption that a multi-racial Australian past was necessarily a site of 'racial' violence or at least had acted to the detriment of the nation as an egalitarian, democratic community. In presenting a detailed history of the multi-racial community of Darwin, I have attempted to provide a more subtle discussion of white 'racism' and 'anti-racism'. In writing the story of Darwin's working-class community, I have been struck, not by its conflict and divisions, but by its ability to generate a sense of community spirit which crossed 'racial' divides. Nevertheless, even in a tiny community the size of Darwin, it has been impossible to draw reductionist conclusions as to the relative inclusion or exclusion of the 'coloured' population. Rather, I have shown that experiences differed depending on the ideological stance of the white protagonists, and on the cultural and class standing of the various ethnic groups.

In terms of political ideology, Darwin had advocates of every persuasion. The white internationalists were a powerful lobby group within Darwin and within the North Australian Workers' Union. They kept the issue of 'racial' discrimination in the forefront of local debate. Their involvement in both workplace and social activities allowed a gradual breaking down of the 'racial' barriers imposed on the 'coloured' population of Darwin. They lived by their ideology, socialising, drinking, dancing and playing sport alongside Darwin's coloured residents. In doing so, they were joined by a number of so-called 'half-caste' Aboriginal workers, and by Filipino, Chinese and 'Malay' workers who similarly advocated internationalist solidarity. From this perspective there was a marked change over time. The influence of communism after 1928 was an important factor in changing white attitudes.

The white colonialists were also a powerful voice in Darwin. They were to be found amongst the 'silvertail' administrative staff, encouraged by conservative administrators. The pearling masters, striving to retain cheap 'coloured' labour for their industry, were similarly amongst those who advocated a colonial view. The colonialist stance shared some of the characteristics with that of White Australia, in that it sustained a belief in the inequality of the 'races'. Both groups sought to create a 'racially' segregated and stratified society. The primary difference between the two was that the colonialists openly advocated the use of 'coloured' labour. White Australians advocated segregation only as a poor alternative to their dream

of achieving a pure white nation. In contrast to the internationalist lobby, which responded to a changing world, the colonialists appeared to retain their anachronistic ideological stance throughout the period. There was little evidence in 1940 that anything had changed since colonial times. The ideology of colonialism, as it applied to 'cheap coloured' labour was not limited to the elite. Many who claimed to stand for a White Australia and a white workforce were prepared to employ Aboriginal servants under conditions which were clearly contrary to their professed belief in egalitarianism. The hypocrisy of White Australia is evident in its tacit acceptance of colonialist exploitative practices.

Attempting to define the responses of White Australian advocates towards 'coloured' labour has been difficult. What appears to be a simple doctrine in rhetoric was often ambiguous in implementation. This is best discussed in the context of the various ethnic group case studies presented in this thesis.

The case of the 'half-caste' watersiders demonstrates that White Australians, for all their insistence on 'racial' purity, were able to include non-white workers within their community. This inclusion was made tentatively in 1922, but by the 1930s had become an established tradition amongst Darwin's working-class. The terms of their acceptance, however, remained problematic in that it assumed a separation between so-called 'half-castes' and 'full-bloods'. This 'racial' division was enforced through the regulations of the *Aboriginals Ordinance* which advocated the assimilation of so-called 'half-castes' into white society. The relative integration of the 'half-castes' was in contrast to the continued segregation and subjugation of the Aboriginal population. In terms of gender difference, it was also apparent that the inclusion of watersiders in the union was based on their acceptance into the masculine culture of the working-class. Their participation in Australian Rules Football, in particular, was seen as a passport to acceptance. To the extent that the young Chinese and 'Malays' were able to engage in sport, they too were welcomed as part the working-class community. The place of women in this world was less clear. It was only in the late 1930s that the white unionists extended solidarity to include 'half-caste' women.

The case of Japanese and Malay indentured workers serves to strengthen the sense of a truly diverse Plural Australia. Although White Australians had lobbied for their exclusion in the early 1910s, by the late 1930s isolationism had been rejected in favour of worker internationalism, as Japanese and Malay workers extended a hand of solidarity towards

Australia's workers. Plural Australia's relationship with the Japanese was apparently bipartisan. The Japanese, in their capacity as temporary workers, appear to have been welcomed by the elite administration, the business world and by the NAWU. The status of Malay workers was more in line with that of 'half-caste' workers. Their inclusion in the community was influenced by worker solidarity which found a common enemy in the colonial labour practices of the Dutch East Indies.

It is important to acknowledge that this sense of working-class solidarity did not exist in Darwin in 1911. The initial development of unionism appeared to confirm the worst of White Australia as Chinese and Filipino workers were excluded and shunned as 'coolies'. The exclusion of Chinese was not seriously questioned until 1928 with the advent of communist internationalism in Darwin. By 1940, however, when the NAWU came under threat, the multi-racial workers, including the Chinese, rallied to support the union and the community that had developed in those intervening years. There were key outside influences in shaping its character. The tendency to regard the Chinese community as the 'other' had almost entirely disappeared by this time. This was not so much a product of deliberate assimilation, so much as an indication of the changing Chinese culture, as the nationalist Chinese movement sought to embrace western modernity. The stereotypical images of Chinese which typified early White Australian discourse had become obsolete. The face of Plural Australia in the 1930s was one of many 'colours', but less obviously one of different cultures as the effects of modern globalisation began to be felt.

By 1940, White Australian advocates had clearly altered their perspective on the inclusion of 'coloured' workers in Australia. They were no longer able to sustain a discourse of 'racial' prejudice in the face of the increasing questioning of 'racial' doctrine. Being forced to recognise that Asian workers were involved in the labour movement, they found it increasingly difficult to conjure up the spectre of 'coolie' workers. Having lived for three decades with the knowledge that a White Australia would never be realised, and that Plural Australia was their daily reality, they had been forced to change their attitudes, if only out of self-interest.

If history is intended to engage with issues which are important for social change, then the writing of Plural Australia should be recognised as having important ramifications for the way in which we construct our national identity, in terms of Aboriginal Australia, our relationship with the Asia-Pacific region, and most importantly in the continued development of multiculturalism. Multicultural Australia needs some sense of history if it is

to strengthen itself against New Right monoculturalists. The cultural diversity and richness of our past, seen through the lense of a pluralist paradigm, is surely a more apposite history for a multicultural present, than the restrictive 'flat' history of a monocultural past. A history of Plural Australia, in all its complexity, has resonances with present day debates. It should not be constructed as a romantic, sanitised past, nor should it be rejected as a shameful past. We need to engage with the issues and debates of Plural Australia in order to better understand the debate over multicultural Australia. Nor is it sufficient to write histories of individual 'ethnic' groups, treating each case in isolation, as a specialist history, while mainstream histories continue to assume an 'Anglo-Celtic' society. Mainstream history should be written from within a plural paradigm, attempting to include all ethnic groups as they interact together as a community. Benedict Anderson has shown that the national community comes to be imagined, not through direct contact with that community, but through the modern media. Histories which assume a plural imagined community can, therefore, shape a new sense of nation as inclusive rather than exclusive.

The narrative of Plural Australia should not be imagined as a local or even as a northern paradigm. To the extent that it seeks to map out the development of a more inclusive sense of Australian community, it is a paradigm which has wider application. The historical images of Western Australia and Queensland already point to a plural past, though these images are usually framed within the White Australian paradigm. Little has been written of the creation of a more inclusive and egalitarian Plural Australia, such as that demonstrated in the changing attitudes of Darwin's working-class. This shift away from White Australian ideology lay in the combined influences of colonialist policies and internationalist ideology. Given that both these factors existed in northern Queensland, one can assume that similar narratives might be told of this region. The historical methodology required to construct this type of narrative involves both the use of detailed analysis of local case studies with a 'history-from-below' approach and the re-examination of official and local documents with an eye for pluralist discourse.

Historians must acknowledge their complicity in shaping histories. We are not at the mercy of the 'facts'. In choosing evidence, in choosing a particular sociological or theoretical framework, we are already determining the character of our histories. If the methodology used in this thesis were applied to other locations in Australia, then a broader history of Plural Australia would emerge. Australia's past can be constructed as ethnically

diverse, and it is possible to formulate that narrative to highlight a more inclusive and less exclusive national past. To write histories of Plural Australia, we need only to ask the appropriate questions and to look beneath the apparently smooth surface of the White Australian past.

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