

“That we may obtain our religious liberty...”: Aboriginal Women, Faith and Rights in Early Twentieth Century Victoria, Australia*

Patricia Grimshaw

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Article abstract

The paper, focused on a few years at the end of the First World War, explores the request of a group of Aborigines in the Australian state of Victoria for freedom of religion. Given that the colony and now state of Victoria had been a stronghold of liberalism, the need for Indigenous Victorians to petition for the removal of outside restrictions on their religious beliefs or practices might seem surprising indeed. But with a Pentecostal revival in train on the mission stations to which many Aborigines were confined, members of the government agency, the Board for the Protection of the Aborigines, preferred the decorum of mainstream Protestant church services to potentially unsettling expressions of charismatic and experiential spirituality. The circumstances surrounding the revivalists' resistance to the restriction of Aboriginal Christians' choice of religious expression offer insight into the intersections of faith and gender within the historically created relations of power in this colonial site. Though the revival was extinguished, it stood as a notable instance of Indigenous Victorian women deploying the language of Christian human rights to assert the claims to just treatment and social justice that would characterize later successful Indigenous activism.

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Abstract

The paper, focused on a few years at the end of the First World War, explores the request of a group of Aborigines in the Australian state of Victoria for freedom of religion. Given that the colony and now state of Victoria had been a stronghold of liberalism, the need for Indigenous Victorians to petition for the removal of outside restrictions on their religious beliefs or practices might seem surprising indeed. But with a Pentecostal revival in train on the mission stations to which many Aborigines were confined, members of the government agency, the Board for the Protection of the Aborigines, preferred the decorum of mainstream Protestant church services to potentially unsettling expressions of charismatic and experiential spirituality. The circumstances surrounding the revivalists' resistance to the restriction of Aboriginal Christians' choice of religious expression offer insight into the intersections of faith and gender within the historically created relations of power in this colonial site. Though the revival was extinguished, it stood as a notable instance of Indigenous Victorian women deploying the language of Christian human rights to assert the claims to just treatment and social justice that would characterize later successful Indigenous activism.

Résumé

Cet article explore la demande de liberté de culte, à la fin de la Première Guerre mondiale, présentée par un groupe d'Aborigènes de l'État australien de Victoria. Sachant que la colonie (et désormais l'État) de Victoria était un bastion du libéralisme, il peut paraître surprenant que les Aborigènes aient senti le besoin de présenter une pétition visant à lever des contraintes extérieures

* I thank Fiona Davis for research assistance for this article, and for their helpful comments, Joanna Cruickshank, Claire McLisky, Andrew May, and participants in the session on gender, faith, and colonialism at the Canadian Historical Association conference held in Vancouver in June 2008, especially Peggy Brock and Adele Perry.

imposées sur leurs croyances ou pratiques religieuses. Pourtant, dans la mouvance du renouveau pentecôtiste dans les missions auxquelles nombre d'Aborigènes étaient confinés, les représentants du gouvernement, notamment du Board for the Protection of the Aborigines, préféraient le décorum du culte protestant dominant aux manifestations potentiellement dérangeantes de la spiritualité charismatique et expérientielle des Aborigènes. L'analyse des circonstances entourant la résistance exprimée par les adeptes du renouveau religieux quant aux restrictions imposées aux revendications de liberté religieuse des chrétiens aborigènes ouvre une fenêtre sur l'intersection entre la foi et le statut social des hommes et des femmes dans le cadre des relations de pouvoir historiques créées dans cette société coloniale. Si le renouveau religieux s'est finalement estompé, il n'en demeure pas moins un exemple marquant d'Aborigènes victoriennes ayant recours à la terminologie chrétienne des droits de la personne pour revendiquer un traitement équitable et une justice sociale qui allaient subséquemment caractériser un activisme indigène réussi.

On 19 August 1917, a Victorian Aboriginal woman, Mrs. Mary McRae, wrote a letter with her husband Alex McRae to a woman whom she addressed as “My dearest Mrs Bon.” Mary McRae was living on the government Aboriginal Reserve of Coranderrk, some 65 kilometres northeast of the city of Melbourne. Mrs. Ann Bon was a well known humanitarian, a Scottish born pastoralist’s widow, who had for decades served as an advocate for Victorian Aborigines and currently held an appointment as the first woman on the Board for the Protection of the Aborigines (BPA).¹ Mary McRae had a very special request, namely, that Ann Bon might intervene with the state authorities about a matter of concern to many in her community. “I would kindly ask of your help on behalf of Aborigines ... that we may obtain our religious liberty by holding religious meetings in our cottages.”² Mary McRae’s request for freedom of religion in a state that had been a stronghold of liberalism, and in a year that Victorian Aboriginal men were serving in a war on behalf of the

1 Joan Gillison, “Bon, Ann Fraser (1838–1936),” *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, vol. 7, (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2005), 338–9; Patricia Grimshaw, “Ann Bon,” in *The Biographical Dictionary of Scottish Women*, eds., Elizabeth Ewan, Sue Innes, Sian Reynolds, and Rose Pipes (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), 40. Bon also used the spelling “Anne.”

2 Elizabeth Nelson, Sandra Smith, and Patricia Grimshaw, eds., *Letters from Aboriginal Women of Victoria, 1867–1926*, (Melbourne: Melbourne University History Monograph Series, 2002), 232. The archival records used in this article are held in the Victorian Public Record Office (hereafter PROV), the National Australian Archives (Victorian Branch) (hereafter NAAV), and the State Library of Victoria (hereafter SLV). Selected material in these archives has been transcribed and published in the above limited edition collection.

Mother Country, might seem surprising indeed. The circumstances surrounding the letter writers' resistance to the restriction of Aboriginal Christians' choice of religious expression offer insight into the intersections of faith and gender within the historically created relations of power in this colonial site.³

From 1851, when Victoria separated from New South Wales to form the separate Colony of Victoria, missionaries and their supporters in government had pursued the fraught goals of humanitarianism. Aborigines were afforded protection from further depredations after the initial settler onslaught on their land and lives, and minimal material support on reserves allocated by the government. There, humanitarians expected them to abandon their traditional religious understandings for the Christian faith, and embrace western education and ways of living. Amid this distressing situation, many Aborigines accepted the new faith, and entered into a novel outreach that included brokering communications across the boundaries of the settler and indigenous communities. Women of the new churches, better positioned perhaps than indigenous men to resist authoritarian control, were in the forefront of expressing dissent from many colonial government pressures.⁴

Historians have noted that indigenous spokespeople for indigenous civil and political rights in Britain's colonies and white dominions were most often educated in mission schools.⁵ This paper focuses on certain Aboriginal women's assertion of the right to religious freedom during and just after World War I. Maud Mullett, Mary McRae, and her sister-in-law Lizzie McRae were as children educated on the Reverend Friedrich Hagenauer's Moravian mission of Ramahyuck. They were married to indigenous men, were in their late twenties or early thirties, and were attracted to Pentecostalism that had taken root in Melbourne in 1908. They and their families sustained close connections with their communities on the missions and reserves, but all lived for periods of time independent of this restrictive management. The archival record that affords

3 I have previously explored the lives of Victorian Aboriginal women in Patricia Grimshaw, "Colonising Motherhood: Evangelical Social Reformers and Koorie Women in Victoria, Australia, 1880s to the Early 1900s," *Women's History Review*, 8, no. 2 (1999): 329–46; Patricia Grimshaw and Elizabeth Nelson, "Empire, 'the Civilising Mission' and Indigenous Christian Women in Colonial Victoria," *Australian Feminist Studies*, 16, no. 36 (2001): 295–309; Patricia Grimshaw, "Federation as a Turning Point in Australian History," *Australian Historical Studies*, special edition, "Challenging Histories," no. 118 (2002): 25–41.

4 See Diane Barwick, "And the Lubras are Ladies Now," in *Women's Role in Aboriginal Society*, ed., Fay Gale (Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, 1974), 50–63; Jan Critchett, *Untold Stories: Memories and Lives of Victorian Kooris* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1998); Isobel White, Diane Barwick, and Betty Meehan, eds., *Fighters and Singers: The Lives of Some Australian Aboriginal Women* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1985).

5 See Julie Evans, Patricia Grimshaw, David Philips, and Shurlee Swain, *Equal Subjects, Unequal Rights: Indigenous Peoples in Britain's Settler Colonies, 1830–1910* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003).

entry to their experiences is tantalizingly fragmentary, consisting principally of a few letters that these indigenous Christian women wrote to colonial officials, together with brief responses from bureaucrats and managers to the women or to each other. The letters indicate the women’s efforts to uphold their entitlement to certain rights derived from their faith in the face of restrictions on their autonomy resulting from legislation dating back to the 1860s. This paper begins by tracing the history of the missions and reserves through which the colonial government continued to regulate Aboriginal lives into the twentieth century, and their exclusion from political citizenship that inevitably provided a problematic context for the assertion of human rights. It then considers the available details about the Pentecostal revival, and the circumstances of the women’s families, leading to consideration of the women’s appeal to their faith in defence of religious liberty.

Mission stations and compromised rights

As in other areas, two factors loom large in an understanding of the level of control that the government in Victoria and its bureaucracy exercised over indigenous Victorians’ choice of religious expression. First, in Victoria, as in the previous settlement of the continent, the British government and subsequent settler governments did not recognize Aborigines’ right to land. Once considered recipients of charity if they wanted living space, Aborigines were expected, in exchange for assistance, to conform to the regulations of a grudging state, an oppressive context for practising a new religion. A Christian Aborigine from a mission just north of the Murray River described Aborigines’ plight in 1888. Although the land rightly belonged to the natives, he wrote in an “Appeal,” the white settler took possession of it all:

[Aboriginal people] have no call to it now the settlers [have] established themselves all over the country, and take possession of it all, and unmercifully punish the natives by means of powder and shot; but upon this question national economy — that is, the purse — pleads, in excuse of violence, civilization, and the advancement of the Christian religion; but for all this the heathens lose and the Christians gain.⁶

Second, the victors in the context of land, the white settlers, nourished a deep racism that deflected the efforts of indigenous Christians to make a life, the explicit promise of the civilizing mission, free of the restrictions of the reserves. Guilt at the recent atrocities inflicted on the indigenous people was visited on the surviving victims.

6 Fred Scales, “Appeal on Behalf of the Blacks of Queensland,” cited in *Fourteenth Report of the Maloga Mission*, ed., Daniel Matthews (London: Woodford, Fawcett & Co., 1890). I owe this reference to Claire McLisky.

The government reserve at Coranderrk, from which Mary McRae wrote to Ann Bon, was one of the reserves on which from the 1860s Aboriginal people were permitted to live in order to receive state support. The men that the British government appointed in the 1840s as Protectors of Aborigines in the district that became Victoria had been singularly ineffectual in the face of a vicious land grab that had characterized previously settled areas of Australia.⁷ Surviving Aborigines were deprived of their customary livelihoods and severely impoverished, prompting humanitarians to voice concerns about their plight. With the Victorian indigenous population reduced from 6,000 or 7,000 in 1836 to a few hundred in 1858, a Select Committee of the Victorian parliament recommended that “a vigorous effort should be made to repair the great wrongs done to the Aborigines in the past.”⁸ In two pieces of legislation in 1860 and 1869, the government allocated land for missions and instituted a body, the BPA, to oversee the running of Anglican settlements at Lake Condah and Lake Tyers, the Presbyterian-supported Moravians at Ebenezer and Ramahyuck, and the government reserves of Coranderrk and Framlingham. Land remained Crown property. The government handed to missionaries and reserve managers responsibility for the distribution of rations and clothing to residents, and applauded endeavours to persuade Aborigines to accept Christianity, schooling, and Western ways of living.⁹

As a corollary of Aborigines’ acceptance — as settler governments saw it — of charity, the legislation instituted a considerable number of regulations that

7 For the early settlement of the colony of Victoria, see Richard Broome, *Aboriginal Victorians: A History Since 1800* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 2005); M.F. Christie, *Aborigines in Colonial Victoria 1835–86* (Sydney: Sydney University Press, 1979); Jan Critchett, *A ‘Distant Field of Murder’: Western District Frontiers, 1834–1848* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1990); Margaret Kiddle, *Men of Yesterday: A Social History of the Western District of Victoria, 1834–1890*, (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1961).

8 “Report of the Select Committee of the Legislative Council to Inquire into the Condition of the Natives,” *Victorian Parliamentary Papers*, 1858–1859.

9 For Victorian missions, see Broome; Aldo Massola, *Aboriginal Mission Stations in Victoria* (Melbourne: The Hawthorn Press, 1970); Bain Attwood, *The Making of the Aborigines* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1989); Richard Broome, *Aboriginal Australians: Black Responses to White Dominance 1788–1994*, 2nd ed. (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1994); Jan Critchett, *Our Land Till We Die: A History of Framlingham Aborigines* (Warrnambool, Vic.: Deakin University Press, 1992); Keith Cole, *The Lake Condah Aboriginal Mission*, (Bendigo, Vic.: Keith Cole Publications, 1984); Aldo Massola, *Coranderrk: A History of the Aboriginal Station* (Kilmore, Vic.: Lowden Publishing, 1975); Diane Barwick, “Coranderrk and Cumerogunga: Pioneers and Policy,” in *Opportunity and Response: Case Studies in Economic Development*, eds., T. Scarlett Epstein and David H. Penny (London: C. Hurst, 1972), 10–68. Bain Attwood, et al., *A Life Together, A Life Apart: A History of Relations between Europeans and Aborigines* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1994); Diane Barwick, “This Most Resolute Lady: A Biography Puzzle,” in *Metaphors of Interpretation: Essays in Honour of W.E.H Stanner*, eds. Diane Barwick, Marie Reay, and Jeremy Beckett (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1985), 185–239.

bore negatively upon the residents' freedom of movement, personal autonomy, and control of their children. Missions and the state now were partners in prescribing the constraints that Aborigines had to accept in exchange for personal security from assault and a meagre subsistence. While not all Aborigines moved to missions, those who maintained their independence could be required to do so if they were deemed vagrants. The mission stations were the only places where Aborigines could look for a secure means of living, shelter, clothes, and food. They had no land left under their own control, their usual means of living had gone with their land, and the alternative of camping, eating “bush tucker,” and accepting sporadic wage labour was an uncertain basis for feeding families. Learning about the missionaries' Christ and learning to read and write came only with the decision to abandon personal independence. There were few signs that this fraught situation would diminish. The 1869 Act to Provide for the Protection and Management of the Aboriginal Natives of Victoria gave the state further rights to control the movement of Aborigines and in certain circumstances assume guardianship of their children.¹⁰ Aborigines who chose to live as fringe dwellers near country towns or mission residents who challenged authorities were at particular risk.

The missionaries and reserve managers found quickly to their dismay that Aborigines adopted Christianity, became literate, and yet resisted the exercise of church and state power. Missionaries presumed themselves to be engaged in a humanitarian endeavour, wished to be loved, and craved to be in good standing in ecclesiastical circles. This position made them vulnerable, and their Christian flock held some influence in a tussle of power that the missionaries mostly dominated but could not entirely control. Initially, missionaries saw hopeful progress in the school children; indeed, the school at Ramahyuck topped the colony in the annual inspection in 1879. A proud Friedrich Hagenauer's report to the BPA that year declared: “The work of training and educating the young has been well carried on ... and the best results can be expected in future years, when these children grow up into men and women.”¹¹ But it was John Bulmer writing from the mission station at Lake Tyers who early on pinpointed a difference of perception between himself and his protégés that would become a major source of tension. The mission dwellers, including those educated as children on the mission, quickly exerted their human rights and clearly regarded the mission lands as their own in exchange for the huge expanse of land they had lost. “They do not think they ought to be under control.

10 John Chesterman and Brian Galligan, *Citizens Without Rights: Aborigines and Australian Citizenship* (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 16.

11 Friedrich Hagenauer, “Report to the Central Board,” cited in Jenny Martin, “Issues of Gender and the Aboriginal Women of South Eastern Victoria: A Study of Two Mission Stations, Lake Tyers and Lake Wellington 1860–1895,” (B.A. honours thesis, University of Melbourne, 1990), 18.

They take all that is given them as their due as we have got their country and they get what is given as rent,” complained Bulmer. “All this makes it difficult to deal with them, and I must say that most of my troubles have come from this source.”¹² If the mission residents in increasing numbers worshipped in the Christian chapels, they nevertheless resisted the dominance that the missionaries regarded as proper demeanor and that the legislation fostered.

It was only a question of time before a new challenge arose to urge educated Aborigines of mixed descent off the missions to seek a livelihood in mainstream settler society. Hagenauer was one of the missionaries whose advice fed into new legislation in the 1880s that had the intention of propelling educated Christians into the white community. He asserted that there were ample Christian churches in the rural settlements, where their religious needs were amply met. A new Victorian government Act in 1886 declared that any person of mixed Aboriginal and European descent over the age of 15 and under the age of 35 had forthwith to leave the missions. Adolescents of mixed descent were apprenticed out or put into domestic service. The Board also utilized its powers to remove any orphan, or child considered to be neglected, to an industrial school or orphanage. In 1899, an even more intrusive regulation enabled authorities to remove any Aboriginal child from its parents if the governor declared it was for “better” care and education.¹³ As missionaries aged or left their posts, the government gradually replaced them with secular appointments, often ex-military men who nevertheless oversaw religious services. Government ministers began moves to centralize the remaining Aborigines to fewer sites and to rent or sell off the reserves to eager settler farmers.

Given the scarcity of employment available, and their lack of resources, the forced integration of mixed descent Aborigines into settler society was a recipe for disastrous poverty. Few had recognized white relatives. Many resisted movement from land they saw as belonging to them and were unwilling to be separated from relatives, especially as there were restrictions even on visiting the stations. What is more, Aborigines who continued on the stations faced increased pressure and struggled to prevent their own children from being removed in early adolescence to distant locations. The answer to getting their families off the mission while avoiding destitution was to assert a continuing entitlement to state support: they demanded land, houses, and transitional material support. Continual discouragement did not prevent Aborigines’ insistence on this entitlement. In 1910, the poverty of Aborigines living off the mission was such that the new legislation had to permit some people of mixed descent to return, with their assertion of the need for social justice undiminished.

12 Bulmer Papers, Museum of Victoria, cited in Martin, 24.

13 Chesterman and Galligan, 25–6.

The 1908 Adult Suffrage Act, which enfranchised women in Victoria with no exclusions, ought to have provided the political citizenship for indigenous Victorians that could have protected their civil rights. The settler government ignored the fact that Aboriginal rights for Victorian men and women were already severely compromised. In practice though not strictly in law, exclusions of Aboriginies from political citizenship from the federal government had permitted in some states under the 1902 Commonwealth Franchise Act had flowed on to other states, despite Victoria’s own constitutions and laws.¹⁴ The debate about the political rights of women, which reached a peak in the 1890s and first decade of the twentieth century as the colonies moved to federate, inevitably stimulated discussion of the rights of minority groups who could destabilize prevailing regimes. While Victoria was home to a very small Aboriginal community, it was not the case in the north and west of Australia, where settlers were distinctly fearful at the challenge to white supremacy that political citizenship for Aborigines seemed to pose. In 1886 and 1893 respectively, Queensland and Western Australia reduced the indigenous male eligibility to property holders and used their political muscle to exclude Aborigines from the federal vote.¹⁵ In the Australian Constitution that came into effect in January 1901, federal political rights were declared identical with those already in existence in the separate states.

The women’s vote and the indigenous vote were considered together on a nation-wide basis in the 1902 Commonwealth Franchise Act, one of the first major pieces of legislation of the new federal parliament. The new government initially hoped to strike a uniform franchise including all Aborigines and all women, but found itself confronted with strident opposition. A Western Australian senator argued that the bill “would be all right for Tasmania, where there are no blacks, and probably all right for such states as New South Wales or Victoria; but to give the vote to most of the aboriginals in Western Australia would be a very serious matter indeed.”¹⁶ In contrast the Victorian lower house member for Southern Melbourne declared: “To draw a ‘colour line’ and say that because a man’s face is black he therefore is not able to understand the principles of civilisation, is misanthropic, inhumane and unchristian.”¹⁷ But, finally,

14 See *ibid.*; Patricia Grimshaw, “White Men’s Fears and White Women’s Hopes: The 1908 Victorian Adult Suffrage Act,” *Victorian Historical Journal*, vol 79, no 2, November 2008, pp.185-209; Patricia Grimshaw, “Colonialism, Power and Women’s Political Citizenship in Australia, 1894–1908,” in *Suffrage, Gender and Citizenship: International Perspectives on Parliamentary Reform*, eds. Seija-Leena Nevala-Nurmi, Pirjo Markkola, and Irma Sulkunen (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009), 34-55.

15 See Patricia Grimshaw, “White Women as ‘Nation Builders’: Gender, Colonialism and the Federal Vote,” in *Selective Democracy: Race, Gender and the Australian Vote*, eds. John Chesterman and David Philips (Melbourne: Circa Press, 2003), 1–20.

16 *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, vol. 10, 29 May 1902, 13003.

17 *Ibid.*, vol. 9, 10 April 1902, 11980.

the racist views prevailed. The crucial clause read: “No aboriginal native of Australia, Asia, Africa or the islands of the Pacific, except New Zealand, shall be entitled to have his name placed on the electoral roll, unless so entitled under Section 41 of the Constitution.”¹⁸ Section 41 of the Constitution enshrined federal voting rights for those who had vote in the states, but was subsequently interpreted to sustain the political rights only of Aborigines already on state electoral rolls on 1 January 1901.¹⁹ “Individual bureaucratic whim,” two analysts say, “rather than legal consistency seems to have determined who was barred.”²⁰ Victorian electoral officers used the state registration as a basis for the federal roll. Because Aborigines might not, it appeared, be registered for federal elections, officials generally believed that they also could not be entered on the state roll, though some mixed descent Aborigines very possibly did register for state elections despite these uncertainties; overall indigenous Victorians were excluded and thus further disadvantaged in assertions of their civil rights.

The advent of Pentecostalism

If Maud Mullett, Mary McRae, and Lizzie McRae persisted in claiming rights during the Pentecostal revival of 1916 to 1918, there were contextual circumstances that assisted their capacity to take this stance. All three women had received a basic education at the Ramahyuck mission school, and all had close kin who did not fit into stereotypes of passive mission residents.

In the case of Mrs. Maud Mullett, the first to bring Pentecostal influences to Coranderrk, it was her mother who had attracted attention of the authorities through what was termed “defiant” behaviour. Maud was the eldest daughter of Emily Wood Stephen, a spirited and talented woman who had grown up on the mission at Ramahyuck presided over by Hagenauer and his wife Louise. As a child Emily Wood was a prize student, became nurse to the children of one of Hagenauer’s married daughters who lived in Melbourne, and sustained a strongly affectionate if socially unequal, relationship with the missionaries.²¹ When in 1872 compulsory schooling was inaugurated in Victoria the mission school had been incorporated into the state system, and government inspectors praised the school as among the highest performing in

18 See Chesterman and Galligan.

19 See *ibid.*; Pat Stretton and Christine Finnimore, “Black Fellow Citizens: Aborigines and the Commonwealth Franchise,” *Australian Historical Studies* 25, no. 101 (October 1993): 521–35. The Commonwealth Parliament reinstated political rights for Aborigines in the south-eastern states at federal level in 1949, and for Queensland and Western Australia in 1962.

20 Stretton and Finnimore, 530.

21 Battye Library, Perth, Le Souef Family Papers, Letters of Emily Stephen to Ellie Le Souef (nee Hagenauer), 1890–1893.

the colony.²² On Ramahyuck Emily married Harry Stephen, and bore 11 children. When the Education Department shut the school in 1901, the 40 year-old mother took charge of the pupils for several years before Ramahyuck residents were shifted gradually to the other Gippsland mission at Lake Tyers.

In 1904 Emily Stephen boldly left the mission, taking five of her children, to seek a livelihood through hop picking. Her freedom turned out to be distressingly brief. Emily and 13 year-old Alfred were diagnosed with tuberculosis and spent three months in hospital before she asked for permission to return. At this point she was presented with a list of demands as the price of being accepted, including the stipulation that she “comply with the Rules and Regulations of the Board and the station.” She was to accept without complaint that Alfred might be sent anywhere for training, and five year old Blanche would become the special protégé of the Manager.²³

The following year the whole Stephen family agreed to shift to Lake Tyers. There, a series of letters in the mission archives reveal that Emily had not been covered by her experience. An incident in 1911 illustrates. At Lake Tyers John Bulmer and his wife Caroline, superseded as managers by government appointees, remained living on the site. In April 1911, Captain R. Howe, the newly appointed superintendent, took up his pen to write to the Secretary of the BPA. He was in a mood to straighten affairs out at the station, especially since he considered the aging Bulmers were becoming a nuisance to his disciplinary regime. Howe’s purpose on this day was to lodge a complaint about Emily Stephen. His tone was outraged: “I have the honor to report that the conduct of Emily Stephen is detrimental to the good order & discipline of this station she practically defies me but in such a manner that I can only make a general complaint, and she goes round all the blacks and the Bulmers telling them that she has the ‘Board’ on her side.”²⁴ He recommended that she be immediately removed from the station.

The substance of the dispute in which Captain Howe and Emily Stephen were engaged, and for which he alleged her guilty of insubordination, centred

22 For Friedrich Hagenauer and other Moravian missionaries, see Felicity Jensz, “Collecting Cultures for God: German Moravian Missionaries and the British Colony of Victoria, 1848–1908” (Ph.D. diss., University of Melbourne, 2007); Robert Kenny, *The Lamb Enters the Dreaming: Nathanael Pepper and the Ruptured World* (Carlton North, Vic.: Scribe, 2007); Phillip Pepper, *You are What You Make Yourself to Be: The Story of a Victorian Aboriginal Family, 1842–1980* (Melbourne: Hyland House, 1980); Massola, *Aboriginal Mission Stations*; Brian Dickey, ed., *The Australian Dictionary of Evangelical Biography* (Sydney: Evangelical History Association, 1994).

23 Phillip Pepper and Teresa de Araugo, *The Kurnai of Gippsland* (Melbourne: Hyland House, 1985), 236. Emily’s surname is spelled “Steven” in this book.

24 PROV, Victorian Public Record Series (hereafter VPRS) 1694, unit 7, Captain Howe to Mr. Ditchburn, Secretary, BPA, 3 April 1911. Lake Tyers had formally ceased to be a Church of England mission in 1908, but remained of special interest to the church.

on Emily's refusal to have her daughter Blanche's employment shifted from the Bulmers to Captain Howe, whose wife wanted Blanche as a nurse girl for her young children. Captain Howe tried to exert his authority to order 11 year-old Blanche's relocation. Emily Stephen, however, argued that she already had experience of Mrs. Howe's ways when Blanche had been employed previously in the Howe household; Emily viewed the tasks Mrs. Howe expected of her daughter to be onerous. Emily was not slow to wield her pen in turn to put her side of the case to the Board. Mrs. Howe, she wrote in turn, was "too high and mighty & not fit for the position of matron of an Institution like this ... she considers us slaves that we have to bow to her decision." That very day Mrs. Howe had spoken to Blanche in a manner which indicated: "What I say is law & has to be done & no two ways about it." Mrs. Bulmer, on the other hand, was consistently kind and careful. She allowed Blanche time each day for reading and ensured that the girl attended prayers and religious instruction; moreover, she allowed Blanche to return home each day in time to go fishing on the river with her mother and paid her five shillings a week for her work.²⁵

To Emily Stephen's alarm, Captain Howe, beaten on the first round, now hinted that Blanche would soon be old enough to be sent away to service elsewhere in Victoria. She was too young to leave her mother's protection, Emily pleaded with the Board: "A young girl like her may get into bad company, one does not know whom they mix up with when out in service in the city."²⁶ Blanche continued working in the Bulmers' home. By August, however, the Captain's tolerance of Emily Stephen's defiance reached breaking point. He knew, he told the Board angrily, that Emily was working hard to have him rather than herself removed from the station, boasting that she would force the Board to hold a public inquiry, claiming that she herself would have a say in its members. "Emily keeps the whole station in a state of ferment & while she remains here there will be no peace. She is clever in a criminal way & has a most insidious & plausible manner ... which generally impresses & imposes upon anyone who does not know her thoroughly — that is what education has done for her."²⁷ If she were a white woman he would sue her.

This time Howe's view triumphed. In October the BPA obtained from the governor an order-in-council to remove Emily Stephen from Lake Tyers, without her children, forcing her into confinement on the Western District mission

25 Ibid., Emily Stephen to Mr. Callaway, Vice-Chairman, BPA, 30 March 1911 and June 1911. For more detail on the history of Emily Stephen's family, see Phillip Pepper and Teresa de Araugo, *What Did Happen to the Aborigines of Victoria. Volume 1: The Kurnai of Gippsland* (South Yarra, Vic.: Hyland House, 1985).

26 PROV, VPRS 1694, unit 7, Emily Stephen to Mr. Callaway, Vice-Chairman, BPA, 28 February 1911.

27 Ibid., Captain Howe to Mr. Callaway, Vice-Chairman, BPA, 9 August 1911.

station at Lake Condah. Captain Howe had his revenge. By December Emily sent a letter of a very different type to the Board, pleading to see her children for Christmas:

Will you allow me to have my children I have never been parted from them before ... That I might have my two youngest children (Gilbert & Blanche) with me that would be a happy time. Trusting that you will grant the above request [,] I am Dear Sir yours obediently[,] Emily M. Stephen.²⁸

Emily escaped from what became a three-year exile and was reunited with her children by declaring that the family would earn their way on the outside. She was often forced, however, to face the humiliation of writing to the Board, as family members were hit by unemployment, to request rations and clothing.²⁹ But her children learned from the example of a woman who over decades had been a spirited campaigner for rights.

Five years later, in 1916, Emily's eldest daughter, Maud, commenced the fuss over Pentecostalism at Coranderrk. The plea for religious liberty emanated from Maud's conversion to Pentecostalism which had a small but dedicated following surrounding the Good News Hall in North Melbourne, established in 1907 by the charismatic Mrs. Sarah Jane Lancaster.³⁰ Maud Stephen had worked as a baby nurse in the Melbourne home of Ida Hartung, one of the Hagenauers' daughters, before her marriage to a Coranderrk labourer, David Mullett. In November 1915, Maud's husband enlisted for the war and, in February 1916, proceeded overseas to Egypt.³¹ David Mullett and Maud had been living in the inner city Melbourne suburb of Carlton with their four children, Charlotte, Nellie, Rita, and a small son. Sadly, the baby died two months after David's departure. A letter in 1916 from the manager of Coranderrk, Mr. C.A. Robarts, to the secretary of the BPA complained about Mrs. Maud Mullett, who was living in Carlton, a few kilometres from the Good News Hall. In May Maud had been given permission to enter Coranderrk to bury the body of her baby. In July she came again without permission and invited several Aborigines to return to Melbourne with her to visit the Good News Hall. On 17 July, Robarts wrote again to the BPA saying that the previous day Maud once again

28 Ibid., Emily Stephen to Mr. Ditchburn, Secretary, BPA, 7 December 1911.

29 Ibid., Emily Stephen to Captain Crawford, Manager, Lake Condah Mission, 10 September 1914.

30 Barry Chant, *Heart of Fire* (Adelaide: Tabor, 1973); John Harris, *One Blood: 200 Years of Aboriginal Encounter with Christianity: A Story of Hope* (Sydney: Albatross Books, 1990); Barry Chant, "The Spirit of Pentecost: Origins and Development of the Pentecostal Movement in Australia, 1870–1939" (Ph.D. diss., Macquarie University, 1999).

31 National Archives of Australia, Canberra (hereafter NAAC), Australian Imperial Force, Base Records Office, (hereafter AIF), Series no. B2455, First Australian Imperial Force Personal Dossier, 1914–1920, "David Mullett."

arrived and this time took a young boy, Willie Logan, away without the manager's knowledge so that he could visit the Good News Hall with her.

The Manager was nervous as it was an unfortunate time for any further disturbance of discipline, because there were moves afoot to close the reserve and move the remaining residents to Lake Tyers, in order that the land at Coranderrk could be apportioned for returned servicemen. The residents were anxious, some were angry. Maud Mullett was a constant visitor to the Hall, he told the Board, where he was informed that meetings "of a very exciting nature" were held:

Her influence over the natives at present is very undesirable, as she aggravated the present state of mind which is existing among the natives. After her departure last night (Sunday) a meeting was again held in one of the cottages and the screams and wails even heard at a great distance, when they are under that spell, nothing can be done to silence the natives. I would therefore request that a letter be sent to Maud Mullett prohibiting her visiting the station.³²

The Board did not reply. It was difficult territory on which to intrude, and there were always a few humanitarians who were watching the stations carefully.

On 7 October, Robarts tried again. Maud Mullett and "a lady friend of the same following as Miss Hetherington" had come to the station. He became aware of their presence when "some of the natives were excited by the idea of Mrs Maud Mullett's friend holding a religious meeting in one of the cottages. I saw Maude [*sic*] Mullett & her friend and informed them that no religious meetings were allowed to be held in the cottages."

Their visit was very disturbing[;] there was a feverishness on the station during the day and in the evening some of the natives gave way to shaking and shivering ... In weeks past the religious atmosphere has been normal; and no element should be permitted which will rouse the people. I would again ask that the permit to visit the station granted to Mrs Maud Mullett be withdrawn.³³

The introduction of the name of Miss Hetherington brought a new complication to the reserve manager and the BPA, as Sister Isabella Hetherington was attached to the Melbourne Pentecostal group. An Irish-born nurse, she had migrated to Victoria in 1903 for health reasons and worked on arrival as a governess. Hetherington nurtured, she later wrote, a deep desire "to go and succour others," especially the Australian Aborigines, of whose desperate circum-

32 Nelson, Smith, and Grimshaw, 230. For details on the unrest at Coranderrk, see Diane Barwick, *Rebellion at Coranderrk* (Canberra: Aboriginal History Inc, 1998).

33 Nelson, Smith, and Grimshaw, 230.

stances she had heard when still in Ireland. She acted on this desire. First she lived with an indigenous group on the banks of the Murray River, before joining the faith based Australian (United) Aboriginal Mission. When a startling occurrence of speaking in tongues led to her expulsion, she commenced itinerant work again with her young adopted Aboriginal daughter Nellie. This work led her back to Victoria, to the Pentecostals in Melbourne and thence to their mission house in rural Victoria at Bunyip. The Pentecostals, influenced by American Pentecostalism, endorsed speaking in tongues, practised “dancing in the Spirit” and the casting out of demons, claimed to see visions, and upheld the power to prophesy, all highly unconventional for mainstream Protestants. Hetherington’s sympathetic biographer describes her as “A pleasant-faced, demure and extremely short-sighted woman with small, round glasses.” She was consistently devout, he writes, compassionate, generous, hard working, and willing to serve with all denominations.³⁴

Not all the residents of Coranderrk appreciated the Pentecostal style of worship and some grumbled at the disturbance it created. It was not this objection, however, but a fear that religious enthusiasm would carry over to some barely controllable political challenge that worried the manager. At this news of shrieking, quaking, and quivering, Robarts got the permission he wanted to suppress the Pentecostals. The BPA helped rid the manager of his problem, though couching their edict carefully to appear unrelated to religious choices: “With reference to the complaint that Mrs Maud Mullett and a lady friend visited the station on Sunday last and caused the natives to become excited at the idea of holding a religious meeting, Mr Robarts is informed that in view of Mrs Mullett’s defiance of authority in removing Willie Logan, the permission granted her to visit the station has been withdrawn.”³⁵ On 16 October, the news was passed on to Maud Mullett from whom the authorities heard no more for the time being.

Persisting with the issue of religious choice

The silencing of Maud Mullett was not, however, the end of the threat of disorder flowing from the Pentecostals. There were other converts ready to become involved, including Mary McRae, backed up by her husband Alex, who were followers of the faith, together with Alex’s brother Henry McRae and his wife Lizzie. Both women were born on Ramahyuck and had benefited from the relatively sound education the mission school provided. Lizzie’s ancestry included a grandmother, Nora Foster, who had been educated to an advanced level at a mission in Albury, Western Australia, conducted by Mrs. Anne

34 Barry Chant, “Hetherington, Isabella (c.1870–1946),” *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Supplementary vol. (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2005), 176–7.

35 Nelson, Smith, and Grimshaw, 230.

Camfield, and sent to Ramahyuck in her teens as a potential bride for one of the young Christian mission men.³⁶ Her father had been saved as a young child from a massacre site in Rockhampton, Queensland, and then left for Coranderrk.³⁷ Lizzie in her mature years worked as a nurse.³⁸

Their husbands were educated at Coranderrk, but had experienced an unusual period of relative freedom in their earlier childhoods. Alex and Henry were sons of the well known indigenous artist, Tommy McRae. Tommy McRae was born around the year 1835 on his family's land in northern Victoria, on the southern side of the River Murray. He had been witness to the pastoral invasion of the area, drawings of which, and of Aborigines' traditional living, brought him to the attention of sympathetic settlers, including Ann Bon. He earned a living working on sheep stations and as a stockman. The BPA listed him in 1885 with his wife Lily, their children, and his brother and brother's wife at Lake Moodemere at Wahgunyah, where they fished, raised poultry and sold pen-and-ink drawings to tourists. Alex and Henry were born there, the latter in 1889.³⁹ Tommy had escaped government regulation until in the 1890s he suffered the blow of having four children removed from their riverbank home to the reserve at Coranderrk. Tommy McRae could not prevent his children's removal and fought unsuccessfully to regain their custody. He died in 1901, the year Victoria became a state of the new Commonwealth of Australia.⁴⁰

Tommy McRae's sons, Alexander and Henry, grew to maturity on the Coranderrk Reserve and married sisters from Ramahyuck: Alexander wed Mary Darby in the Coranderrk Church in December 1907, and Henry McRae wed Lizzie Hamilton in August two years later. Lizzie and Henry had several children who died in childhood. Mary and Alex had eight children: Jemima Ellen Lilian, Sydney Henry James, David Hetherington, Thomas Albert William, who survived to adulthood; and four who died at a young age: Isabel, Mary Angelene, Stewart Alexander, and Josephine May.⁴¹

Mary McRae's letter to Ann Bon of 1917 on behalf of the Aborigines at Coranderrk took up the cause for the right of Aboriginal Christians to worship

36 See Patricia Grimshaw, "Faith, Missionary Life, and the Family," in *Gender and Empire*, ed. Philippa Levine (Oxford: Oxford History of the British Empire Companion Series, Oxford University Press, 2004), 260–80; Joanna Cruickshank, "'To Exercise a Beneficial Influence over a Man': Marriage, Gender and the Native Institutions in Early Colonial Australia," in *Evangelists of Empire? Missionaries in Colonial History*, eds. Amanda Barry, et al., (Melbourne: Scholarship Research Centre, University of Melbourne, 2008), 115–24.

37 Percy Leason, *The Last of the Victorian Aborigines*, issued in connection with an Exhibition of Portraits at the Athenaeum Gallery, Collins St., Melbourne, 1934, 16–17.

38 Critchett, *Untold Stories*, 76.

39 Nelson, Smith, and Grimshaw, 324; and Leason.

40 Andrew Sayers, "McRae, Tommy (c. 1835–1901)," *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Supplementary vol. (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2005), 256–7.

41 See Nelson, Smith, and Grimshaw, 324; and Leason.

as they wished. Her letter ran: “I would kindly ask of your help on behalf of Aborigines ... that we may obtain our religious liberty by holding religious meetings in our cottages when Mr Robarts is not holding a meeting; for the scripture saith the Most High doth not dwell in temples made with hands for ye are the temples of the living God.” She continued: “We ask only for what is right in the sight of God.”⁴²

When Ann Bon took up this appeal with the secretary of the BPA, Mr. William Ditchburn, he appeared already irritated by Bon’s proclivity to serve as an advocate for Aborigines. Ann Bon’s query met with a terse and unsympathetic explanation. He noted with apparent disapproval that Mary McRae wanted “greater freedom as regards prayer meetings” and had a general explanation for his negativism: She was “so obviously actuated by a ruling desire to make mischief that no weight should be attached to her communication.”⁴³ Robarts followed up with a request that the McRaes be removed to Lake Tyers: “The station is kept somewhat in a state of ferment by her bad influence.”⁴⁴

Mary McRae and her husband found themselves and their children sent to Lake Tyers, but Mary continued regardless. Some Lake Tyers Christians complained to Ann Bon that since John Bulmer’s death in 1912 there had been few services held on the reserve. Ann Bon recommended to the Board that Sister Hetherington should be invited to do so.⁴⁵ A group of Aboriginal Christians at Lake Tyers, including followers of their countryman Harry Connolly, who had taken services both at Coranderrk and Lake Tyers, were opposed, however, to Pentecostalism. Some said the sister’s methods were too stimulating, so that one woman as a consequence displayed “religious delusion and insane excitement.”⁴⁶ Mary and the other Pentecostals nevertheless persevered. On 19 August 1918, Mary wrote again to Ann Bon, letting her know that she and Alex “have our little meetings ourselves in front of our house as we have been prohibited from having [services] in the Church.” Mr. Ferguson, the manager, had declared that they could not hold services in the church as they would “have to get the Bishop’s permission”; Lake Tyers fell within the see of the Bishop of Gippsland. What did Anne Bon think of this situation?⁴⁷ On 12 September 1918, Mr. Parker, now Secretary of the BPA, wrote to Ferguson, manager at Lake Tyers. Mrs. Bon had sent letters to the Honourable the Chief Secretary, within whose government ministry indigenous affairs fell. Parker was “of the opinion that such meetings should only be allowed if under proper supervision of either a white — or competent black person ... inquire whether there is any-

42 Nelson, Smith, and Grimshaw, 232.

43 Ibid., 233.

44 Ibid.

45 Pepper and de Araugo, *The Kurnai of Gippsland*, 241.

46 Ibid. The McRae surname was spelled “McCrae” in this book.

47 Nelson, Smith, and Grimshaw, 235.

one you can recommend.” Ferguson replied that he could not do so: the McRae family was a representative of Miss Hetherington who was indeed the cause of trouble. “Who is to have charge of the Church of England at Lake Tyers — the Bishop of Gippsland or Miss H and her representatives?” he asked angrily. “The position was a little better since Mary McRae joined the choir,” he reported.⁴⁸ Ann Bon duly brought the matter to the attention of the Secretary of the Board, but Mary and Alex McRae and their fellow Christians received no confirmation of their deeply held sense of rights.

This was not quite the end of the matter. In 1921, Mary’s sister-in-law Lizzie McRae and her husband Henry wrote to Mr. Heathershaw, the Chief Commissioner of Police in Melbourne. Lizzie and Henry had been staying for several years with Sister Hetherington at the Pentecostal mission house at Bunyip. They attempted to extract funding for their benefactor who, as a faith missionary, would not solicit funds for herself. Hetherington, they reported, had for the past year provided a home for two Aboriginal girls who had run away from a convent. A friend had spoken highly of Mr. Heathershaw and, indeed, the McRaes endorsed that opinion personally if he was, as they thought, the same man who had come to Coranderrk “when the natives rose up against him [the manager, Mr. Robarts] and spoke against him to Mr. J Murray who was then Premier.”⁴⁹ The police had come and removed the girls, but there had been no need for police action. Miss Hetherington had looked after them, had “cared, loved and tendered them as her own child.” She was up in the early morning hours and worked late growing food for them.

Mary McRae then revealed her aim in writing the letter: a request that the BPA should pay Miss Hetherington her share of the government allotment owed to the two girls.

We ask you is it fair to a Lady who gives up her whole life to God to care for others[;] especially those of a despised and degraded race whom white men of today believe that God Cant [sic] save[;] and we do praise God as full blood natives of Victoria[;] my husband and I can say that through Miss Hetherington we have seen and been taught more about Jesus, than ever any Manager and his wife on the Aboriginal Reserves in this State or any other could teach us[;] for the white man thinks a black person has no mind[.] But praise his name God is no respecter of persons[.] Again I ask is a Christianised country to oppress the stranger in our native land who came from a far country for His name’s sake in the gospel to teach us about the love of Jesus Christ our redeemer who died to save mankind from sin[,] black as well as white[,] all nations in one[.]⁵⁰

48 Ibid., 236.

49 The Chief Commissioner of Police in 1921 was Sir John Gellibrand. Hearnshaw may have been temporarily in charge.

50 Nelson, Smith, and Grimshaw, 238.

There was no further word of Pentecostal revivalism on the missions and reserves. It was back to the church building for worship, back to people — men, usually white — approved by the Board conducting the services, and there was an end to public enthusiastic expressions of spirituality.

The indigenous movers and shakers of the revival continued with greater or lesser success to pursue the means of sustaining their freedom. David Mullett returned at the end of the war, where he had served in France, to dispute his exclusion from Coranderrk, now cleared to make way for returned soldiers; but not Aboriginal soldiers.⁵¹ His returned serviceman's record shows he upheld his rights in the face of indifference or rejection.⁵² Late in 1919, doubtless because of difficulties in gaining employment in the city, he, Maud, and their family returned to Coranderrk. She was apparently in a chastened mood, Manager Robarts noted with satisfaction. Maud was now going regularly to morning church services at the station and had joined the choir. Mary and Alex McRae moved off the mission to live in Warrnambool where in 1920 Mary McRae died tragically young leaving her many children, her health debilitated from childbearing and poverty. Lizzie and Henry McRae continued to live for some further time at the Bunyip mission house with Sister Hetherington, before moving to Warrnambool, where Lizzie died in 1936. Isabella Hetherington, blamed by the reserve managers as instigator of the revival, became a faith missionary in the north of Australia, teaching an Aboriginal school, preaching, living in huts, still tilling the soil and making do, a Pentecostal to the end.

The sparks of the revival Hetherington helped ignite among these Victorian Aborigines were extinguished. Just as this incident was not the first, neither was it the last instance of indigenous Victorian women deploying the language of Christian human rights to assert claims to just treatment and social justice. After World War II, when another generation of Victorian Aborigines fought with white Australians, civil and political rights were extended to Aborigines and governments returned small allotments of reserve land to their control. The rectification by settler governments of past wrongs remains a work in progress in a year when the Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, presented a formal apology to the children forcibly removed from their families and all who suffered from this cruelty.

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PATRICIA GRIMSHAW is a Professorial Research Fellow in the School of Historical Studies at the University of Melbourne. Her research interests have included the history of colonialism and gender history, and she is currently

51 Albert Mullett, interview by Lou Bennett, “Missionary Voices,” <[http://www.abc.net.au/missionvoices.lake tyers/voices of lake tyers/default.htm](http://www.abc.net.au/missionvoices.lake%20tyers/voices%20of%20lake%20tyers/default.htm)>, (viewed 20 October 2008).

52 NAAC, AIF, Series no. B2455, First Australian Imperial Force Personal Dossier, 1914–1920, “David Mullett.”

engaged on a history of missions in Australia. Her publications include *Paths of Duty: American Missionary Wives in Nineteenth Century Hawai'i* (1989), the co-authored *Equal Subjects, Unequal Rights: Indigenous Peoples in British Settler Colonies, 1830-1910* (2003) and the co-edited *Collisions of Cultures and Identities: Settlers and Indigenous Peoples* (2006) and *Missionaries, Indigenous Peoples and Cultural Exchanges*, (forthcoming 2010).

PATRICIA GRIMSHAW est Professorial Research Fellow (chercheuse universitaire) à la School of Historical Studies de l'Université de Melbourne. Ses recherches ont porté sur l'histoire du colonialisme et des rapports hommes-femmes, et elle s'attache actuellement à l'histoire des missions en Australie. Ses publications comprennent *Paths of Duty: American Missionary Wives in Nineteenth Century Hawai'i* (1989), *Equal Subjects, Unequal Rights: Indigenous Peoples in British Settler Colonies, 1830-1910* (en collaboration, 2003) et, en codirection, *Collisions of Cultures and Identities: Settlers and Indigenous Peoples* (2006) ainsi que *Missionaries, Indigenous Peoples and Cultural Exchanges* (à paraître en 2010).