

*The Interpreter*  
*The Legacy of*  
*Francis Fraser Armstrong*

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BA (Design) hon

## *Statement of Presentation*

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I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains, as its main content, work that has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary educational institution, including Murdoch.



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## *Abstract*

This thesis argues that Francis Fraser Armstrong, a young immigrant from Scotland in the earliest years of the colony of Western Australia, was valued not only as an interpreter between the British settlers and the Noongar Aboriginal people, but also as an asset to be exploited by various conflicting factions within both Aboriginal and his own settler society. Dissent within the colonial leadership sabotaged Armstrong's formerly strong relationship with the Noongar community by rejecting a proposal forwarded by him for what might have been the first land rights agreement negotiated in Australia. Power struggles within the settler community drove Armstrong to support the sectarian interests of the Wesleyan Methodist Church. When the political situation changed, it was the Methodist agenda that was furthered when he achieved his greatest degree of influence under Governor Hutt's colonial administration. This success in funding a religious organisation that was not the de facto state church was an important precedent within the context of church/state relations. Armstrong's legacy was considered important enough in the decades after his death, that some of his life story was converted into myth or even fabricated, to better fit the prejudices of a later time.

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## *Table of Contents*

Statement of Presentation .....	2
Copyright Acknowledgement .....	3
Abstract .....	4
Table of Contents .....	5
General acknowledgements .....	6
Introduction .....	7
1. A Very Scottish Dreamtime .....	15
2. Worst Contact .....	28
3. The Education of Armstrong .....	42
4. Stuck on the island with the Cyclops.....	54
Conclusion .....	67
Bibliography .....	71

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§

## *Introduction*

In the early years after the establishment of the British Colony in Western Australia, a crisis point was reached in the deteriorating relationship between the Aboriginal Australians and the settlers who were appropriating their country. Two *Wadjuk Noongar* leaders were killed in retaliation for the killing of two colonists. The spiral of violence between the communities seemed impossible to halt as there was no one known who could both speak the language of both parties and also be in possession of both side's trust. At this critical time in August 1833, a young man from among the settlers was discovered to possess both of those qualities. Having helped resolve the immediate crisis, this immigrant from Scotland who arrived in the colony during December 1829, became a valuable asset to be exploited, not just by Aboriginal and British interests against each other, but also competing interests within the Noongar community and the equally corrosive factions that divided the British. His relationship with the Noongar was sabotaged by the settler leadership refusal to negotiate with the Aboriginal people and the pressure when brought to bear in attempting to harness his skills to service multiple and often mutually incompatible agendas, eventually forced Francis Fraser Armstrong to make a choice about where his own personal loyalties lay, and his choice of the Wesleyan Methodist community from among the competing factions in the settler hierarchy had consequences for the divide between church and state in the colony.

This thesis examines the effect that Armstrong had, either as a passive observer or an active participant, on these disparate communities. Even after his death, the propaganda value of his memory remained a commodity that could be manipulated and exploited. Changed circumstances

in Western Australia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century saw the creation of myths surrounding his life and influence that deviated dramatically from the historical record.

Francis Fraser Armstrong was born on 22 February 1813 in Edinburgh, Scotland, the eldest son of Adam Pearson Armstrong, a colliery proprietor and Margaret Gow, eldest daughter of the Scottish celebrity musician Nathaniel Gow, granddaughter of the equally famous Niel Gow. When Francis was sixteen, his recently widowed father took him, his four brothers, and one sister out to the Swan River Colony then recently established in Western Australia. They arrived by 15 December 1829 on the ship *Gilmore*, one of three ships that formed part of Thomas Peel's land settlement scheme. While Peel employed his father, the family were associated with the initial settlement at Clarence, south of Fremantle, then with Mandurah at the mouth of the Murray River.

After the acrimonious break with Peel the family moved to river-facing land west of the Perth settlement that is still known as *Dalkeith* after the childhood home of Armstrong's father. In his late teens, Francis moved to Perth, working as storekeeper for prominent merchant and landowner George Leake. He did the same job later on for the even more influential George Shenton, senior. Armstrong and Shenton were both close in age, sharing an equally passionate involvement in the cause of the Wesleyan Methodist Church. After Shenton's death in 1867, Armstrong's independent commercial career continued as a salesman and agent, supplemented in later years by a long and successful spell as rate collector for the City of Perth, continued until his own retirement in 1882.

He married the daughter of another of Peel's immigrants in August 1836. He and Mary Ann Mews had at least fourteen children over forty-nine



years of marriage; they jointly managed teaching establishments together on at least three separate occasions. Armstrong died at his home at Mackie Street in East Perth on 22 May 1897 aged eighty-four years, only four years before the colony of Western Australia became part of the Commonwealth of Australia.

Armstrong's relationship with the Aboriginal people of Western Australia, specifically those from the Noongar language groups in the south west of the landmass, is the issue that features most prominently in the historical record. Between 1834 and 1882 he was the first Interpreter to the Natives employed by the colonial government. His role in this capacity included being present at nearly every significant court process involving the Aboriginal people, including criminal trials where the death penalty was invoked. Between 1834 and 1838 Armstrong was Superintendent to the Perth Natives (or variations of this wording) responsible for an institution established west of Perth under the shadow of Mount Eliza. Between 1838 and 1843 he was a constable in Perth responsible for policing Aboriginal people in the town. His spell as headmaster for the Wesleyan Native School in Perth in partnership with his wife from 1840 to 1843 was essentially voluntary work, although the government did contribute a stipend towards the upkeep of those students housed in the Armstrong family home. The final attempt by the government (outside his interpreter duties) to fully employ Armstrong came between 1847 and 1849 when he was sent to Rottnest Island under the job title of Moral Agent. His job was to teach Christian doctrine to the Aboriginal prisoners held there, as well as run the government commissary and manage the (unfinished) light house.

Given the scope of Armstrong's involvement in the affairs of the Western Australian colony during the first two and a half decades of its

existence, there has been a great deal of literature that mentions him. However, in the majority of these works he is a footnote, and only in a handful of these accounts is his role significantly explored. Primary evidence such as contemporary newspaper articles mention him extensively but are hardly unbiased. The journals of the time, including the *Perth Gazette* edited by government postmaster Charles Macfaull, the *Swan River Guardian* edited by William Nairn Clark and the later *Inquirer* edited by Francis Lochée, then afterwards by Edmund Stirling, were all vehemently partisan in the interests of their respective constituencies. The sons of Edmund Stirling married into the Armstrong family and their journalistic contributions provide a unique bias towards his legacy after his death. Armstrong and his family were referenced in government correspondence passed through the Colonial Secretary's office and there are reports presented by Francis Armstrong himself during his periods of full time government employment.

Of literature where Francis Armstrong and his family are the primary focus, *Adam Armstrong: In search of brighter regions*, is a family history account of the Armstrong family who immigrated to Western Australia in 1829 as part of the land settlement scheme orchestrated by Thomas Peel. This publication deals primarily with the genealogy of the family and biographical detail is limited to notes and occasional observations. Sources are not always referenced. The account of Francis Fraser's life is entirely paraphrased from Walker.<sup>1</sup> However unsatisfactory as a history, this work was the first study to bring together most of the family myths and legends, true or otherwise, in one account.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Beverley Walker, 'Francis Fraser Armstrong', *Early Personalities at Rottnest* (Perth: State Library Western Australia, 1975), pp. 1-9.

<sup>2</sup> Gilbert D. L. Armstrong, *Adam Armstrong: In Search of Brighter Regions*, (Newcastle, NSW, 2003), pp. 32-34.

Beverley Walker's essay in *Early Personalities of Rottnest* (1975), archived at the State Library of Western Australia, was the earliest work yet discovered that made a study of Francis Fraser Armstrong's life, weighing first hand sources, primarily government correspondence, and newspaper articles. As the title suggests, this work has an emphasis on Armstrong's association with the Rottnest Island Aboriginal prison and the relationship with his *bête noir*, prison superintendent Henry Vincent. The author is greatly concerned by the discrepancies between the official records then available to her and the lurid account from the notes of Edward Jack Watson (1870-1939).

Watson was a first hand observer of Armstrong during the last phase of his working life, but his pen portrait of Armstrong dates to an earlier time on Rottnest. It is this account that has to be called into question for exaggeration, as Watson is basically inventing dialogue he could never have heard. The events he described took place over twenty years before he was born.<sup>3</sup> Restricting the use of this source to areas the author could actually have witnessed creates an account that does not significantly clash with other scholarly sources on Rottnest such as Green and Moon (1993).<sup>4</sup> Watson's source notes were published in an edited form many decades after his death, and some observations quoted by Walker, such as the less-than-positive relationship Armstrong enjoyed with the Aboriginal people in later years, or the Shakespearean diatribe Vincent was supposed to have dumped upon Armstrong, are not reflected in that published manuscript.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Beverley Walker, 'Henry Vincent', *Early Personalities at Rottnest* (Perth: State Library Western Australia, 1975), p. 11.

<sup>4</sup> Neville Green and Susan Moon, *Far From Home: Aboriginal Prisoners of Rottnest Island 1838-1931* (Nedlands: University of Western Australia Press, 1997), pp. 21-22.

<sup>5</sup> Edward Jack Watson and Donald L. Watson (ed.), *Rottnest: Its Tragedy and Its Glory* (Perth, WA, 1998) pp. 30-33, 73-74.

Walker alludes to the richness of other aspects of Armstrong's life and cites Neville Green as an authority to be consulted. Walker's final observation that Armstrong grew much more conservative with age is important, but can only be fully understood with evidence from beyond Armstrong's Rottneest experience.<sup>6</sup> Green's work, including essays within *A New History of Western Australia* (1981), *Far From Home: Aboriginal Prisoners of Rottneest Island 1838-1931* (1997), and *Aboriginal Australians and Christian Missions* (1988) provides a basis for the understanding of Armstrong's place within the colonial response to the Aboriginal population, although Armstrong is not the primary focus of any of these titles.

A study that does make Armstrong its primary focus is presented through the website of the *Australian Dictionary of Evangelical Biography* via the perspective of his religious affiliation with the Wesleyan Church.<sup>7</sup> This badly written hagiography has to be drawn attention to as it represents the most publically accessible source of information on Armstrong's life, and is currently being plagiarised to form Armstrong's Wikipedia entry (as of May 2015).<sup>8</sup> It fails to make a distinction between the secular Mount Elisa Native Institution which Armstrong supervised, and the later Wesleyan Native School in Perth at which Armstrong was schoolmaster. That this essay draws from the work of an uncredited Walker can be established through its mistake of quoting that Armstrong was the youngest sibling of his family (he was the oldest). References for this essay include some deeply biased theological sources. Shipley in *Full Circle: A History of Wesley*

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<sup>6</sup> Francis Armstrong, 'Rottneest', *The Perth Gazette and Independent Journal of Politics and News*, 26 February 1848, p. 3.

<sup>7</sup> James H. Cain, 'Armstrong, Francis Fraser (1813-1897)', archived at Australian Dictionary of Evangelical Biography, [<http://webjournals.ac.edu.au/ojs/index.php/ADEB/article/view/1413>], accessed on 30 May 2015.

<sup>8</sup> 'Francis Fraser Armstrong', Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, [[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Francis\\_Armstrong](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Francis_Armstrong)], accessed 26 August 2014.

*Church Perth* (2003) used many of the same sources, but in the context of a survey that took into account a wider range of evidence.<sup>9</sup>

The body of this thesis is in four chapters. The first argues for the influence of Armstrong's own Scottish heritage on the unique circumstances that arose to allow Armstrong to take on the role of interpreter, also examining some of the other personalities in the colony who might have taken Armstrong's part, but did not. Chapter two argues that divisions within both Noongar and settler communities together with unrealistic expectations about what he could achieve as an interpreter sabotaged Armstrong's relationship with both, forcing him to look for solace within his religion. This narrow religious interpretation of his responsibilities assisted him to reconcile his duties as interpreter with the conditions of the Aboriginal people caused by the policies of the state he served.

The third chapter examines the same deterioration of the relationship between Armstrong and the Noongar and settler cliques from the perspective of the settler community. It argues that the exploitation of Armstrong's skills for political gain drove Armstrong into the camp of interests represented by the Wesleyan Methodist Christian sect. Armstrong's active involvement in the politics surrounding Aboriginal issues within the settler community opened up another debate about the place of education and religious funding in the colony.

The final chapter explores Armstrong's legacy. What he represented as an interpreter between Aboriginal and Europeans continued to have potency after his death and the political implications of his legacy resulted in the distortion of the historical record to fit the propaganda needs of the new Australian nation state after 1901. The nature of the mythologies

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<sup>9</sup> Thea Shipley, *Full Circle: A History of Wesley Church Perth* (Perth, WA: Uniting Synod of Western Australia, 2003), p. 9.

that were created and those who assisted in their manufacture are examined and the source of much of the misinformation is proved to have come from Armstrong's own family.

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### *A Very Scottish Dreamtime*

Armstrong was the first European to understand and speak fluently the Aboriginal language of the south west of Western Australia as well as command the confidence and trust of both British colonists and Aboriginal people. That he possessed both these attributes placed him in a unique position to negotiate an understanding between the two. The questions this raises are twofold: Why had no other individual been able to mediate effectively between Noongar and the British as the relations between the two deteriorated over the four years of the settler's presence? Secondly, what made Armstrong so unique that he was able assume this role of an intermediary between two very different cultures and in so doing, change the course of the relationship between the two?

It might have seemed like Francis Fraser Armstrong had appeared from nowhere in the late Australian winter of 1833. A delegation of Aboriginal women entered Perth, tiny capital of the colony, to the consternation of its settler inhabitants. In the minds of these colonists, they were sure they were now in a state of war with those people whose land they were in the process of usurping. The women were carrying burning torches. The settlers referred to all the various Aboriginal people they had encountered up to that point as *Natives*, however the people of the southwest of the Australian continent had their own name for themselves: they were *Noongar*. No white person in the town at that time was believed to be capable of communicating in the Noongar language, but what was known by those same settlers was that they had recently killed two Noongar leaders in less than honourable circumstances — they expected retribution. When

Francis Armstrong, a storekeeper in the employ of a wealthy local merchant, stepped forward and questioned the women, he was able to reassure the anxious onlookers that all these people wished for was to ‘renew the friendly understanding which existed previously...[between them]’.<sup>1</sup> They wished to arrange a meeting between some of their men folk and the acting-governor, at which Armstrong would translate. For the British it must have must have seemed like deliverance from disaster. This was the beginning of the young man’s public career as the intermediary between the Aboriginal people of Western Australia and settlers from Britain, of whose number he was one of the very first arrivals. Among the Noongar he was known as ‘Frank’ or ‘Franka.’ To his British countrymen he was the *Interpreter to the Natives*.<sup>2</sup>

This meeting occurred four years and two months after the arrival of the first settler-bearing vessels from Britain. As the tiny immigrant population that arrived in those first few years attempted to wrest control of a landmass many times the size of their home country, from an indigenous population about whom they knew practically nothing, there had been some among them who had attempted to learn the native languages, and some who had even attempted to understand and speak on behalf of that Aboriginal population.

There were at least a couple of others in the colony at that time who could speak the Noongar language with a reasonable degree of fluency, however neither of them by the very nature of their occupations could be said to ever have had the confidence of the Noongar population they were

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<sup>1</sup> Neville Green, ‘Aborigines and white settlers in the nineteenth century’, in C. T. Stannage (ed.), *A New History of Western Australia* (Nedlands: University of Western Australia Press, 1981), pp. 81-83;

‘The Natives’, *The Perth Gazette and Western Australian Journal*, 10 August 1833, p. 126.

<sup>2</sup> ‘The Natives’, *The Perth Gazette and Western Australian Journal*, 10 August 1833, p. 126;

‘The Natives’, *The Perth Gazette and Western Australian Journal*, 7 September 1833, p. 142;

‘The Natives’, *The Perth Gazette and Western Australian Journal*, 1 March 1834, p. 242;

‘The Western Australian Journal’, *The Perth Gazette and Western Australian Journal*, 13 December 1834, p. 406.



tasked with dealing with. Captain Theophilus Ellis and Charles Norcott were both policemen assigned to deal with the Noongar community. In addition to distributing rations (in belated recognition of the lands that had been appropriated by the settlers), they were also tasked with leading the punitive raids against the same in retaliation for transgressions of the Europeans' laws. Ellis was the only white person to die at the so-called Battle of Pinjarra in October 1834. Norcott, who was also present at the massacre, succeeded Ellis as captain of the mounted police.<sup>3</sup>

Among those who did show empathy for the Aboriginal population, but not necessarily possess the language skills (or engender any sympathy for his viewpoint from either side of the conflict), was Robert Menli Lyon (aka Robert Milne). He was quite explicit in aligning his Scottish heritage with concern for the Aboriginal people. He was either a former British army officer or an ordained Church of England priest (possibly both).<sup>4</sup> He drew on the memory of centuries of conflict between England and Scotland, and the historical mistreatment of Scotland by its larger southern neighbour, with the colonist's treatment of their Noongar neighbours. The Noongar leaders Midgegooroo and his son Yagan were held responsible for attacks on the settler community and a bounty was placed on their heads. Lyon drew an analogy between Yagan and the icon of Scottish nationalism and violent resistance to English domination, William Wallace.<sup>5</sup>

The colonial authorities regarded Lyon warily, however his social status, expressed through his education and class, gave him a voice that

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<sup>3</sup> William Burges, 'To the Editor of the Perth Gazette & W.A. Times', *The Perth Gazette and West Australian Times*, 3 July 1868, p. 2;

<sup>4</sup> 'The Natives', *The Perth Gazette and Western Australian Journal*, 11 April 1835, p. 475.

<sup>4</sup> George Fletcher Moore and J. M. R. Cameron (ed.), *The Millendon Memoirs: George Fletcher Moore's Diaries and Letters, 1830-1841* (Victoria Park: Hesperian Press, 2006), p. 135.

<sup>5</sup> Robert Lyon, 'A Vocabulary of the Language of Derbal (continued)', *The Perth Gazette and Western Australian Journal*, 20 April 1833 pp. 62-63.

would not otherwise have been tolerated. What limited influence he did possess was entirely dispersed after he permitted Yagan to escape from his custody after that man's initial capture by colonial soldiers. Lyon had been granted this responsibility on the promise that he would learn the Noongar language with a view to opening up a channel of official communication. Yagan and two other prisoners escaped after only a month of imprisonment on an island off the coast from the mainland. In a last ditch attempt to prove his utility, Lyon published the Aboriginal word list he was compiling, but the editorial that accompanied it in the government-sponsored paper raised doubts as to its accuracy. Midgegooroo was captured, and after a perfunctory hearing at which he was not able to speak, executed by firing squad outside the barracks in the town of Perth on 22 May 1833. Not long afterwards Yagan was lured into an ambush and killed. It was the aftermath of these two deaths that drew Francis Armstrong into the public view. The opportunity now arose to compare the two interpreters in action. One day Armstrong translated, the next, Lyon. Armstrong was to be preferred.<sup>6</sup>

Francis Fraser Armstrong arrived with his father and five siblings to the Swan River Colony on 15 December 1829. He was sixteen years old. Their boat, the *Gilmore*, was one of three carrying immigrants who had signed up to the private commercial immigration scheme formulated by Thomas Peel. Peel's settlers were a mix of gentry and middle-class who had paid for their passage, and a greater number of labourers and skilled artisans who were signed on as employees to Peel, not solely for the living wage that he would provide them, but also to pay back the cost of their passage. Armstrong's father straddled both these categories. He was employed by

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<sup>6</sup> Moore and Cameron (ed.), *The Millendon Memoirs*, p. 275;  
'Grand Encounter at Preston Point', *The Perth Gazette and Western Australian Journal*,  
13 April 1833, p. 58;  
Moore and Cameron (ed.), *The Millendon Memoirs*, p. 135.

Peel as a secretary in London, and on arrival in Australia he was contracted to survey Peel's vast new territories, but soon his duties rapidly expanded to managing much of, if not all of Peel's business interests. As Peel's fortune and his other employees peeled away from him with varying degrees of acrimony, Armstrong was one of the last to remain. The break, when it came, was acrimonious. Armstrong successfully sued for unpaid wages and the eventual settlement between them granted him a portion of Peel's estate on the Murray River, which Armstrong named Ravenswood. Peel's greatest personal flaw was his inability to confide in or trust anyone he considered to be of lower status than himself (he was the cousin of the current British home secretary and soon-to-be Prime Minister). However, Armstrong's own social status within the colony enabled him to acquire a plot of land in his own right. Armstrong had formerly been estate manager for the great house of an absentee parliamentarian located at Nanteos in Wales. Before that, but with far less success, he had been manager as well as a co-owner of a coalmine inherited from his father in his native Scotland.<sup>7</sup>

Armstrong's eldest son, Francis Fraser, was born in Edinburgh, Scotland, and formed part of a disproportionately influential minority among the ethnic and social mix of settlers from the British Isles. Those who identified themselves as part of Northern Britain (rather than from Scotland) tended to come from the middle and upper classes of Scottish society. This was an often-successful attempt to re-align themselves with the English-dominated leadership class and fortunes of a greater British Empire.<sup>8</sup> Other

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<sup>7</sup> Alexandra Hasluck, *Thomas Peel of Swan River* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1965), pp. 141-142;

Gilbert D.L. Armstrong, *Adam Armstrong: In Search of Brighter Regions* (Newcastle, 2003), pp. 20-21, 15-18;

Ronald Richards, *The Murray District of Western Australia: A History* (W.A.: Shire of Murray, 1978) p. 54.

<sup>8</sup> Leigh Beaton, *Scottish settlement and identity in Western Australia: arrivals 1829-1850*, PhD thesis (Murdoch University, 2002) pp. 68-70.

Scottish settlers who shared this aspiration for membership of the ruling elite included the frustrated lawyer cum journalist William Nairn Clarke. The newspaper Clarke owned provided a platform for opposition to the colonial government's policies, including dealings with the Noongar population, and Francis Armstrong was among those who were criticised. Yet Clarke's championship of a contrarian viewpoint was motivated as much by his own failure to achieve a legal appointment within the colonial hierarchy and to inflict payback on those he believed had slighted him as it was by any deeper concern for the welfare of the Aboriginal population.<sup>9</sup>

Lyon and Clark were both examples of those who self-identified as North British to align themselves with the ruling structures, who then failed miserably to attain the position they believed they were entitled to. The example of the Lieutenant-Governor James Stirling, born in Lanarkshire, and founder of the Swan River Colony, is of one who successfully did so. The capital of the colony was named by Stirling after the hometown of the British colonial secretary, Sir George Murray, another Scotsman. It has been proposed that Stirling expressed his identity primarily as British. Tendentially, this same study assigns the same cultural identification to Adam Armstrong.<sup>10</sup> Adam Armstrong was a landowner, but never an office-holding member of Western Australia's ruling elite. There is some circumstantial evidence (in the form of leaked documents against Peel that only Armstrong could have had access to published in the *Swan River Guardian*) that Armstrong's inclinations aligned him to political mavericks such as Clark (at least before Clark targeted his son). Nevertheless there was

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<sup>9</sup> Beaton, *Scottish settlement and identity in Western Australia*, p. 69; Margaret Grellier and Andrew Gill, *The History of the Swan River Guardian, or, The Death of the Free Press in Western Australia in 1838* (Nedlands: A.W. Gill, 1981), pp. 2-3, 19; William Nairn Clarke, 'Colonial Finance' *The Swan River Guardian*, 1 June 1837, p. 126.

<sup>10</sup> Beaton, *Scottish settlement and identity in Western Australia*, p. 272.

a bond between Stirling and Armstrong, even if it was just mutual commiserations at having to deal with the imperious Peel. Stirling assisted Armstrong to make the break from Peel, and that break would not have been possible without his personal assistance. Stirling provided government transport to get Armstrong's family away from Peel's establishment and rations to keep them alive. Armstrong expressed his personal gratitude to Stirling, but to assert that Armstrong's identity was primarily as British is to ignore the unique factors in his own family's history, the knowledge of which was passed down through the generations.<sup>11</sup>

Francis Armstrong's understanding of his own family history could not have on its own, entirely forged the person that would attempt to understand and mediate between two very different cultures, but it could have provided a template for how he might approach such a venture. More crucially, it provided an example of how such an undertaking might be rewarded for having been attempted at all. The background to this history is the nation of Scotland's place within the United Kingdom and the attempt to reconcile a defeated nation's self image with the hegemony of the English state. The literature of Sir Walter Scott, through a blending of historical fact and invention, manufactured a vision of Scottish identity within the United Kingdom that was acceptable to both an English and Scottish readership and most vitally, across the class boundaries. Scott backed up the credibility of his work by the seemingly scientific collection of historical evidence including oral traditions and stories.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> 'The Subject resumed' *The Swan River Guardian*, 16 March 1837, p. 98; Col. Sec. to Lieutenant Erskine, 26 July 1831, (CFS 6/166 229); A. Armstrong to Governor Stirling, 3 September 1834, (CSR 17/153); A. Armstrong to Governor Stirling, 9 November 1834, (CSR 35/188).

<sup>12</sup> Richard J. Evans, *In Defence of History* (London: Granta Books, 1997), p. 16.

Scott was linked to the aristocratic Scott-Buccleuch family, which had historical connections with the Armstrong family, and before that, the Armstrong clan. The two families had occupied territory in the same border region of Scotland and after the fall of the Armstrong clan, the Armstrong family remained as middle class tenants on the estates of the Dukes of Buccleuch. This direct connection only ended during the time of Adam Armstrong's father, Christopher, who had been a factor (manager) on Buccleuch land. Christopher Armstrong took up mercantile interests including leasing a coalmine, and it's extremely implausible for a family link with someone so celebrated not be remembered or discussed. The strongest evidence for enduring memory of the Armstrong's connections with this part of their heritage is in the naming the land Adam eventually acquired in Australia. The farm his family built on the northern bank of the Swan River, roughly half way between Perth and Fremantle, was called *Dalkeith*, after the location of the farm estate where Adam was born. It was also the location of the palace of the Dukes of Buccleuch.<sup>13</sup>

Even closer to Armstrong's circle and harder to ignore, was their family connection to the Scottish poet and balladeer Robert Burns. Burns, like Scott, was also a collector and recorder of Scottish oral heritage, particularly the dialect of English that was spoken on the border region between Scotland and England. His work not only preserved a dialect that was in danger of extinction, it celebrated the unique culture associated with it to the extent that Burns was raised to the status of a cultural hero during his own lifetime. Since then the celebration of his life became indivisible by

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<sup>13</sup> Murray Pittock, 'Sir Walter Scott: historiography contested by fiction', in Robert L. Caserio and Clement Hawes (ed.), *The Cambridge History of the English Novel* (Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 278-279; Helen Smailes, 'Thomas Campbell and the "Camera Lucida": The Buccleuch Statue of the 1st Duke of Wellington', *The Burlington Magazine*, vol. 129, no. 1016 (1987), p. 709; Armstrong, *Adam Armstrong*, pp. 9-11, 15, 20-21.

many from the celebration of Scottish identity itself. Armstrong's linkage to Burns was through his wife's family. Her father and grandfather were contemporaries of Burns, and her father, like Burns and Scott, was celebrated for his collection and codification of Scottish cultural heritage, in his case, musical history.<sup>14</sup>

Francis Armstrong's great-grandfather was Niel Gow. He was noted both as a composer and a virtuoso performer of the violin (or fiddle). His fame came at a period towards the end of the eighteenth-century when successful artists could in some circumstances rise above class distinctions and claim equal celebrity status with the aristocratic class for whom until then they had mostly been servants. The interplay of Gow's friendship with his patron the Duke of Athol was as important to his legend as were his musical accomplishments. Gow's enduring fame was cemented when Robert Burns sought him out. Gow was the better known of the two at the time, however this was a mutually beneficial collaboration. Gow's music was combined with Burn's words, a collaboration that enhanced the reputation of both.<sup>15</sup>

Niel's son (and Francis Armstrong's grandfather) Nathaniel built his own musical career on an extension of his father's celebrity. While both Niel Gow and especially Burns found fame from outside of the ruling class (and mocked it either gently or sarcastically at the same time), Nathaniel's superior education and his father's influence enable him to embrace the aristocratic class. He rose to the musical rank of king's trumpeter in the court of George III, and in his final days of financial embarrassment was granted

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<sup>14</sup> Edmund Swinglehurst, *Robert Burns Country* (London: Grange Books, 1996), p. 6.

<sup>15</sup> Mary Anne Alburger, 'Gow, Niel (1727–1807)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford University Press, 2004), [<http://0-www.oxforddnb.com.prospero.murdoch.edu.au/view/article/111168>], accessed 5 April 2015; Swinglehurst, *Robert Burns Country*, p. 65.

a pension by George IV. In common with Scott and Burns, he was acclaimed as a collector and codifier of Scottish culture, expressed in the form of an extensive music publishing business. Francis was ten years old when his mother died, and unlike his siblings, would also have been old enough to have memories of his maternal grandfather. He would have been aware of the family heritage of investigating a non-dominant culture, assisting in its preservation, and how that role might be celebrated within the culture doing the dominating.<sup>16</sup>

Evidence of this heritage was literally carried to Australia. On the journey to Western Australia the family brought with them a pedal-powered harmonium. Cargo space was at a premium. Making a choice to carry a large musical instrument over other more utilitarian items shows that Adam's wife's memory was still valued five years after she died.<sup>17</sup> More specific evidence of the importance attached to the Gow heritage by the family was recorded in Francis Armstrong's obituary. He died at his home in East Perth on 22 May 1897, at the age of eighty-four. The newspaper article lists many of the achievements that his life could have been commemorated for, such as his connection with the Aboriginal people, his foundation role with the Wesleyan Church, and his civic service with the Perth City Council. But given equal weight to these accomplishments was his relationship to the Gows, enumerating their cultural and musical accomplishments. At his funeral, tartan ribbons were attached to wreathes, although the record does not state whether the patterns belonged to the Armstrong or the Gow clans.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Christopher D. S. Field, 'Gow, Nathaniel (1763–1831)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford University Press, 2004), [<http://0-www.oxforddnb.com.prospero.murdoch.edu.au/view/article/11167>], accessed 5 April 2015.

<sup>17</sup> Armstrong, *Adam Armstrong*, p. 19.

<sup>18</sup> 'Death of Mr. F. F. Armstrong', *The West Australian*, 24 May 1897, p. 2.



The theory of dual British identity among the colonists could apply equally well to certain segments of the population who came from Ireland. There were three examples that came to have a significant effect on the course of race relations within the colony. Frederick Chidgey Irwin was the commandant of the military forces in the Swan River Colony, and second-in-command to Lieutenant-Governor James Stirling. He was acting-governor at the time Armstrong stepped into the public gaze. Private settlers William Mackie and George Fletcher Moore both accepted roles within the administration that secured for them the highest places within the nascent legal establishment of Western Australia (thus excluding William Nairn Clark to his eternal opprobrium). Irwin, Mackie and Moore all shared similar religious sensibilities routed through the evangelical portion of the Anglican Church.<sup>19</sup>

For Irwin and Mackie, their concern with the Aboriginal people of Western Australia was tied to the use of religion as an instrument of authority to contain and control.<sup>20</sup> Neither ever developed a personal relationship with the Noongar population. In the case of Moore, while he certainly shared the other two's basic outlook, he possessed an additional interest in the Aboriginal people that was centred on scientific curiosity. He made an effort to understand the Noongar language, and after Armstrong was drawn into the colonial establishment, collaborated with the much younger man and the new governor who succeeded Stirling to work on a more successful translation tool for the Noongar language (replacing the one

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<sup>19</sup> Green, *A New History of Western Australia*, p. 81.

<sup>20</sup> Green, *A New History of Western Australia*, p. 86;

Neville Green, 'The Cry for Justice and Equality: Some Exceptional Protestant Missionaries in Western Australia', in Tony Swain and Deborah Bird Rose (ed.), *Aboriginal Australians and Christian Missions* (Adelaide: Australian Association for the Study of Religions, 1988), p. 157.

compiled by Lyon).<sup>21</sup> Moore and Armstrong are singled out by Stirling's biographer as the only two within the establishment with any curiosity in the actual culture of the Noongar people by their interest in their 'dreamtime stories.'<sup>22</sup> These origin stories of the Aboriginal people were long dismissed purely as legend by Europeans until scientific studies validated the assertion that some recorded the historical and natural events of hundreds or even thousands of years before.<sup>23</sup>

Moore also had direct dialogue with some of the Noongar people. He had a conversation with Yagan prior to Armstrong's emergence as an interpreter. As these encounters took place before Moore's detailed study of the language, which did not take place until after Yagan's death, the understanding must have been primarily through the use of English (that Yagan had presumably learned from the time he spent with Lyon). Moore's reaction to Yagan's death at a property very near Moore's own in the Swan Valley, provides graphic evidence of the difference between Moore's and Armstrong's attitudes to the Aboriginal people. It indicates why Armstrong was able to achieve the position he acquired. After Yagan was dead, his head was cut off and preserved as a trophy. Moore saw the artefact and admired it; furthermore he desired it for his own collection. Moore was an avid taxidermist, shooting, collecting and preserving birds, reptiles, mammals and plant specimens for shipment back to his family in Ireland for the benefit of their curiosity. Moore's callous reaction to Yagan's death (even given that Yagan had once tried to kill him) demonstrated that he viewed the

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<sup>21</sup> Moore and Cameron (ed.), *The Millendon Memoirs*, p. 461.

<sup>22</sup> Pamela Statham-Drew, *James Stirling: Admiral and Founding Governor of Western Australia* (Nedlands, W.A.: University of Western Australia Press, 2003), p. 365.

<sup>23</sup> Stuart Gary, 'Dreamtime astronomers understood meteors', ABC Science, 15 March 2011, [<http://www.abc.net.au/science/articles/2011/03/15/3160848.htm>], accessed on 1 April 2015.

Aboriginal people as a natural phenomenon to be studied or collected, as much as fellow human beings.<sup>24</sup>

Francis Armstrong achieved fame as an amateur taxidermist. He sold his mounted specimens to supplement his income, and his skill came to the notice of scientists as far afield as the imperial capital of London. His work was later part of the Western Australian displays exhibited at colonial exhibitions and a private project of his was the creation of a dictionary of native Western Australian birds.<sup>25</sup> The deep absorption in the new natural environment that this young man from Scotland found himself in, expressed by his desire to explore and catalogue it, was not an outlook shared by many of his fellow settlers. The environment was seen as something to be dominated and contained – as were its original human inhabitants. Armstrong's Noongar contacts shared with him their knowledge of the country, the birds, plants and animals and their knowledge of its geography. To the other settlers this was merely the useful by-product of the role that they assigned to Armstrong. For the Noongar people this knowledge was part of the very fabric that held their culture together. That Armstrong alone among the *wadjela* sought to commune with them to possess it, is the best explanation of Armstrong's influence.

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<sup>24</sup> Moore and Cameron (ed.), *The Millendon Memoirs*, p. 218, pp. 235-236, p. 258.

<sup>25</sup> Francis Armstrong, 'Collection of Birds &c., for exportation', *The Perth Gazette and Western Australian Journal*, 11 December 1841, p. 1;  
'Intercolonial Exhibition', *The Inquirer and Commercial News*, 14 November 1866, p. 3;  
G.C.L., 'Dalkeith Link', *The West Australian*, 20 September 1947, p. 5.

2.

### *Worst Contact*

Armstrong's relationship with the Aboriginal people evolved over the sixty-eight years of his time in Western Australia. As his initial public involvement had been characterised as one of understanding and respect for the Noongar people, how did this journey lead him to a role that denigrated the status of Aboriginal people within British settler society?

The aftermath of Yagan's death not only brought Armstrong to the notice of his own European community as a mediator; it provided to them evidence of the extent to which he had ingratiated himself within the Noongar community, at least around the area of the Swan River. Some years prior to colonisation, a garrison had been established on the far south coast at King George's Sound. Relations between the local *Menang* Noongar and the soldiers had mostly been peaceful prior to the decision to convert Western Australia into a full British colony in 1829. By 1834 there were Noongar from the south in Perth to act as translators between the British and *Wajduk* Noongar. For Armstrong to be their preferred intermediary demonstrated both the respect in which he was held, and the serious divisions between those who identified themselves as Noongar.<sup>1</sup>

Armstrong was first called on to mediate between settlers and Noongar from among the Noongar themselves. Some weeks after their appeal to Armstrong, the object of that embassy was achieved when two men, Migo and Munday, met with the lieutenant governor, Frederick Irwin, on 4 September 1833. Irwin's first question was as to whether these men came to negotiate on behalf of themselves or for their tribe. Armstrong was

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<sup>1</sup> 'The Natives', *The Perth Gazette and Western Australian Journal*, 10 August 1833, p. 126.

unable to adequately translate a reply and this first confusion highlighted the greatest flaw in both side's negotiating positions. Leadership structures in Noongar society did not permit one individual to make binding decisions on behalf of all, so there was no language to even express the concept Irwin raised. Irwin was similarly compromised in his own right. He owed his position as leader of the colony to the absence of James Stirling who had returned to Britain the previous year. Any policy change he made could be overridden or ignored by his successor, whether that be Stirling returned or the arrival of a higher ranking military officer to the colony. Only eight days later, the latter is what occurred, when Captain Richard Daniell was sworn in as the next acting-governor.<sup>2</sup>

The change in leadership among the British delayed the recognition of how useful Francis Armstrong could be to their interests. The Europeans by now understood that Noongar society was not homogenous. From his time with Yagan, Lyon had attempted to map the different groupings around the Perth area. Armstrong later expanded this understanding, producing detailed reports for the Colonial Secretary's office of all the groupings of Aboriginal people then known to the British in Western Australia.<sup>3</sup> Both Lyon and Armstrong labelled these groupings as *tribes* and this word conveyed to the British concepts of the First Nations of North America or even the Scottish clan system, with a single leader with whom to deal with, but also the frightening possibility of those tribes unifying against a common enemy.<sup>4</sup> But the Wadjuk Noongar around the Swan River area had no qualms in utilising Armstrong against their own rivals to the south from the

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<sup>2</sup> 'The Western Australian Journal', *The Perth Gazette and Western Australian Journal*, 14 September 1833, p. 146.

<sup>3</sup> for example: Francis Armstrong to Colonial Secretary, (CSR 58/158).

<sup>4</sup> Green, *A New History of Western Australia*, p. 84.

Murray River region, and those same rivals had also been the most active in opposing the British incursion into their own country from first contact.

Armstrong and his family had been among those who had experienced violent contact with *Pindjar Noongar*. In June 1830, Armstrong's father was forced to abandon an experimental farm site on the Serpentine River due to both flooding winter rains and a 'hail of spears'.<sup>5</sup> He retreated to the Mandurah settlement at the mouth of the Murray River, and it was there a month later that one of the men in his work party, a young Scotsman named George Mackenzie, was speared to death. He was the first colonist known to die at the hand of an Aboriginal person in Western Australia. Francis was near by.<sup>6</sup> The family endured another twelve months under a state of siege from the elements, aggressive Noongar and the increasingly arbitrary and autocratic Thomas Peel. The breaking point was probably a skirmish between Noongar and the small military garrison during which a Noongar leader was shot. The British commandant speculated that this confrontation was probably sparked by the destruction of fish traps by settlers across the mouth of the Murray River.<sup>7</sup> Armstrong's father abandoned both Mandurah and his employment one week later in July 1831, taking up the offer of assistance from the current governor (and fellow Scotsman) Stirling.<sup>8</sup>

Even at the Armstrong family's next home at Dalkeith (its original Noongar name being *Nanulgarup*) on the north side of the Melville estuary down river from Perth, the family could not be isolated from demonstrations of violence between Noongar and settler, although in this instance, the

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<sup>5</sup> Ronald Richards, *The Murray District of Western Australia: A History* (WA: Shire of Murray, 1978), p. 47.

<sup>6</sup> Richards, *The Murray District of Western Australia*, p. 47.

<sup>7</sup> Richards, *The Murray District of Western Australia*, pp. 51-52.

<sup>8</sup> Colonial Secretary to Erskine, (letter) 26 Jul 1831, (CFS 6/166 229).

violence was definitely perpetrated by a European. In January 1833 a Noongar man was shot at in an unprovoked attack near the Armstrong farm. Blank cartridges were allegedly fired on this occasion and there is no evidence that Francis or any of his family were in any way involved, other than by their proximity. This seemingly random outrage was part of another escalating cycle of violence between Noongar and British culminating this time in the deaths of Midgegooroo and Yagan. A second shooting in similar circumstances occurred a couple of months later. On this occasion the culprit was apprehended and stated in his defence that he wished 'to shew [sic] his companion how they treated the natives in the other colonies.'<sup>9</sup> Armstrong's mediations finally brought to British attention how many among the Perth groupings alone had died at the hand of the settlers since 1829. Yet they still would not have appreciated how the loss of those sixteen dead (who would have been predominantly warriors) and many more injured, had opened up the country to predatory raids from neighbouring Noongar groups. The primary hope of the Wadjuk Noongar was that friendship with the British would mean an ally against their now much stronger southern rivals.<sup>10</sup>

The hope for this eventual alliance and the current tenuous peace came close to collapse during the ten months of leadership stagnation under Daniell's rule, prior to Governor Stirling's return. Armstrong's standing among the Noongar was threatened by the cynical exploitation of Armstrong's status by a certain section of the administration. A Noongar man suspected of theft was persuaded to travel to Perth under the false pretence that his predicament would be sorted out by a conversation with

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<sup>9</sup> 'Wanton Attack upon the Natives', *The Perth Gazette and Western Australian Journal*, 19 January 1833, p. 11;

Charles Macfaull, 'Editorial', *The Perth Gazette and Western Australian Journal*, 4 May 1833, p. 71.

<sup>10</sup> 'The Natives', *The Perth Gazette and Western Australian Journal*, 7 September 1833, p. 142.

'Franka.' On Molly Dobbin's arrival in Perth he was instead thrown into prison and tormented that he would be 'shot "all the same as Midgegooroo."' Molly Dobbin promptly escaped his captivity and other more thoughtful members of the establishment were left to ruminate about whether hostilities were about to resume between the British and their immediate neighbours.<sup>11</sup> It became necessary to repeat the ceremony of conciliation Armstrong had mediated between Irwin and the two Noongar men for Daniell and Munday (one of the two), so as to repair a rapidly deteriorating situation. On 25 April 1834, hands were shook all round.<sup>12</sup>

The previous day an event had occurred that radically changed the attitude of the British leadership towards their local neighbours and also Francis Armstrong. Within full sight of the town of Perth, yet separated from it by the water of the Swan, the flour mill at Point Belches on the southern side of river was raided by Noongar men from the Murray River. Only after the raid was complete and a large quantity of flour stolen, the proprietor, a young man called George Shenton escaped to raise the alarm. Captain Ellis, Superintendent to the Natives, set off in pursuit and in due course some of the attackers were captured and subjected to brutal corporal punishment before eventually being released. This was an awakening by the leadership that it was not just Thomas Peel's property aspirations down at the Murray being stunted; Pindjar Noongar resistance now threatened the Perth region as well. Most chastening to the authorities was the public knowledge that they had received early warning of the attack from Wadjuk Noongar sources passed to them by Armstrong, and had chosen to ignore it.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> 'The Natives', *The Perth Gazette and Western Australian Journal*, 1 March 1834, p. 242.

<sup>12</sup> 'The Natives', *The Perth Gazette and Western Australian Journal*, 29 March 1834, p. 258.

<sup>13</sup> 'Robbery committed by the Murray River Natives at the wind-mill opposite Mount Eliza', *The Perth Gazette and Western Australian Journal*, 26 April 1834, p. 274.



Stirling, now knighted and promoted to full governor, returned in June 1834. The policy prior to his departure towards the Aboriginal population within his colony could be paraphrased as ignoring the issue and hoping it would go away. However, he rapidly adapted to the changed environment he found on return, no doubt assisted by a briefing from Irwin whom he had met in England after Irwin's commission expired. Francis Armstrong had become the unofficial interpreter between the Aboriginal people and the settler government. Stirling made this position an official one in December 1834. He was also gifted an ex-gratia payment for services rendered, which presumably included the further intelligence, supplied via his contacts, on the movements of Pindjar Noongar in their own country in the days around the attack by British forces that finally ended the threat they were perceived to pose to the colonists' interests. According to the differing accounts, between fifteen to fifty men, women and children died near the location of the town site of Pinjarra on the Murray River, that the heavily armed party of mounted police and settlers were ostensibly there to survey. There was only one death on the British side. Captain Ellis, recently promoted by Stirling to command the mounted police force, died from his wounds a few days after falling off his horse. His loss also created a job vacancy within the colonial civil service.<sup>14</sup>

The job Armstrong was eventually offered was part of an experiment without precedent that could only have been conceived if someone such as Armstrong existed. It was created in part from the fear that the colony might lose his unique skills. The post of Interpreter he was assigned was not budgeted as a fulltime position and in years to come

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<sup>14</sup> Richards, *The Murray District of Western Australia*, pp. 90-95;  
Daisy Bates, 'Battle of Pinjarra, Causes and Consequences', *Western Mail*, 5 August 1926, p. 42;  
'The Natives', *The Perth Gazette and Western Australian Journal*, 11 April 1835, p. 475.

Armstrong might only be paid for his services during occasional court proceedings. Armstrong applied for the vacant job of Superintendent to the Native Tribes sometime during November 1834 but he did not receive it. Ellis's successor as mounted police leader was Charles Norcott, who assumed most of the duties Ellis had performed. It was recognised that the goodwill and apparent influence that Armstrong enjoyed among the Perth Noongar went beyond what might be expected from just a policeman.

Contributing to the urgency to create some sort of more substantial role for Armstrong was a letter received by Stirling from Armstrong's father. Ostensibly a request for a loan to develop further his Dalkeith property, it contained the implicit warning that his now adult sons were considering leaving the colony if greater opportunities were not open to them.<sup>15</sup> The eventual approach made to Armstrong by the government appealed to his desire to (in his own words) 'do good between the white people and the natives.' Francis now lived in Perth, managing the store of wealthy and influential Perth merchant George Leake. Armstrong's current annual salary of £110 (in addition to rations) was a generous one for the time, and this situation also appeared to have allowed him considerable time to cultivate his Noongar contacts. In addition, he was recorded as being one of the inaugural teachers of the Sunday school that was founded by the Wesleyan Methodist Christian sect in Perth about this same time.<sup>16</sup> The appeal to his better nature was a success and he took a considerable cut in both pay and conditions to found and run a 'Native Institution' located at the foot of Mount Elisa, close to but discretely out of sight of the town of Perth.

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<sup>15</sup> Adam Armstrong to Stirling, 9 November 1834, (CSR 35/188).

<sup>16</sup> Francis Armstrong, 'Correspondence', *The Perth Gazette and Western Australian Journal*, 29 October 1836, p. 789; Charles Jenkins, *A Century of Methodism in Western Australia 1830-1930*, (Perth: Methodist Book Depot, 1930), p. 14.

It was an unprecedented experiment that at one stage came close to delivering a compromise understanding between Aborigines and Europeans, well over a century-and-a-half before the Australian Commonwealth recognised a similar understanding after the Wik Native Title court decision in 1996. What the Native Institution did lay down was a template for an enduring pattern of well-intentioned institutions set up to fail Aboriginal people through unrealistic expectations and discrepancies between the support promised and that which was actually delivered. Armstrong's open-ended brief was to create an establishment for Noongars of the Perth region that would be economically self supporting and at the same time provide sustenance and training in the European lifestyle to those who chose to participate. There was no compulsion to attend the institution or to remain there. However, once under Armstrong's tutelage they were expected to be subordinate to him and receive his instruction. His first instructions were to organise the building of a dwelling for himself and his charges and to prepare the land about the site for cultivation using European farming methods. The government supplied him with a boat. At the end of 1834 Francis Armstrong was still only twenty-one years old.<sup>17</sup>

The creation of the Native Institution was an implicit recognition of the prior custodianship of the lands (now exclusively the property of the settlers) by Aboriginal people through the explicit recognition that denial of access to country deprived those people the means of independently supporting themselves. This reality was acknowledged by, among others, Irwin, who promoted the Institution when back in Britain as evidence of the

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<sup>17</sup> 'The Western Australian Journal', *The Perth Gazette and Western Australian Journal*, 13 December 1834, p. 406.

administration's enlightenment.<sup>18</sup> However, the replacement of land access with European skills also implied that there would then be a place within the European society for those to use those skills. The initial success of the Institution as a training venture set the seal for its eventual failure four years later. The market forces so beloved by the British leadership made it more attractive for well-trained workers to take employment in Perth, where there was an acute labour shortage. By 1837 there were periods when Armstrong was completely alone, isolated from both Europeans and Noongar. He complained with some bitterness: 'the natives never come to converse with me now, on any subject'.<sup>19</sup>

The abandonment of Armstrong by both sides coincided with the rejection of the proposal placed by Stirling to his governing council, and promoted by Armstrong (presumably on behalf of representations made to him by Noongar contacts), that a formal agreement be made between the parties. Alienated territory would be compensated for by a one-off payment of food and clothing. In return, British land title would be granted to Aboriginal people for country not currently occupied by the British and some rights to access of that alienated land not yet exploited by the settlers. Whatever support the proposal had in principle was nullified by the realisation that any economic loss this decision would bring would have to be borne by the settlers and they alone. There would be no financial support from the Imperial government. The extent of the counter-proposal was the reintroduction of the ration supplies that had been the government policy before the institution was founded. There was also a feeble reassurance, which was passed to Armstrong to translate in reply: 'that it was not the

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<sup>18</sup> Irwin quoted in Thea Shipley, *Full Circle: A History of the Wesley Church, Perth* (East Perth, W.A.: Uniting Church Synod of Western Australia, 2003), p. 43.

<sup>19</sup> Francis Armstrong, 'Correspondence', *The Perth Gazette and Western Australian Journal*, 29 October 1836, p. 789.

intention of the Governor to deprive them of any portion of land beyond that which may be required by the white inhabitants of this territory' <sup>20</sup>

If there was realisation by the Noongar that Armstrong was powerless to deliver any further positive outcomes on their behalf, British disenchantment was a direct result of his initial successes. Closer interaction between the communities in town inflamed latent xenophobia, expressed in the fear that economically empowered Noongar might out-compete the Europeans and the more visceral fear engendered by the confident expression of Noongar cultural mores, such as when rivalries between Wadjuk, Belliar and Pindjar groupings were worked out in running battles fought with spears through the streets of Perth. Armstrong's duties as interpreter expanded as Noongar increasingly became entangled in the British justice system and this obscured his responsibilities as superintendent. The Mount Eliza Institution had been deliberately located so as to preserve the delicate moral sensibilities of some in the town by keeping their neighbours well out of sight. When Noongar entered the town in a customary state of undress, it was Armstrong who was now being criticized for not being visible enough. The death-knell of the institution came with a petition to the governor presented in October 1838. '...the *disgusting* exposures daily made in our streets' long complained about would finally be suppressed, and spears in town would be confiscated. Armstrong's role was redefined again, this time as a policeman. <sup>21</sup>

Armstrong's reassignment as native constable for Perth by the end of 1838 marked the end of his ability and desire (if it ever truly existed) to

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<sup>20</sup> 'The Western Australian Journal', *The Perth Gazette and Western Australian Journal*, 17 September 1836, p. 765.

<sup>21</sup> A Friend to Morality, 'Correspondence', *The Perth Gazette and Western Australian Journal*, 16 May 1835, p. 495;  
'A Memorial...', *The Perth Gazette and Western Australian Journal*, 13 October 1838, p. 162.

promote the values of Noongar society alongside that of his own culture. Armstrong's continuing interest in the welfare of the Aboriginal people came to be increasingly defined by his own cultural prejudices, particularly those religious values reinforced by his staunch and enduring support for the cause of the Wesleyan Methodist Church. By the time of Armstrong's marriage in August 1836 to Mary Ann Mews, government and broader settler support for the Native Institution was beginning to wane and Armstrong was knocked back when he requested a pay rise to support his new family. His first child was born in October 1837. Mews would have brought home to Armstrong another perspective of the Noongar culture. Before their marriage, she had stared down a Noongar man who held a spear to her face outside her father's home in Perth and threatened to kill her.<sup>22</sup> Working as a team, Francis and Mary's interactions with the Aboriginal people continued, but on a very different social balance than previously.

No example of this change was starker than in the case of Munday, the Noongar leader with whose safe passage Armstrong had once been entrusted to arrange and was subsequently presented to two separate governors. Munday was gaoled for threatening Armstrong's life in December 1839, after Armstrong interfered in some 'domestic squabbles', while executing his duty as a constable in Perth.<sup>23</sup> Munday's relationship with the colonists, if not his former respect for Armstrong, was restored by a subsequent revision of policy that saw him appointed as a native constable in his own right, charged with policing his own people in accordance with the colonists' law. He was content to accept a subservient position within the

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<sup>22</sup> Mary Ann Mews, 'The Western Australian Journal', *The Perth Gazette and Western Australian Journal*, 17 October 1835, p. 582.

<sup>23</sup> Charles Macfaull, *The Perth Gazette and Western Australian Journal*, 21 December 1839, p. 202.

new hierarchy so long as it confirmed his higher status among his own community.<sup>24</sup>

Armstrong's official isolation was relieved by the creation of a new class of officialdom: that of the 'Protector of Natives', with one appointed to each administrative region by 1840. Among them, Charles Symmons seems to have had the closest working relationship with Armstrong if measured by the praise he heaped on the interpreter in most of his reports.<sup>25</sup> Armstrong also found support from Governor Stirling's replacement that arrived in 1839. John Hutt's close working relationship with Armstrong had to have been a factor in the revival of the concept of the Mount Elisa Native Institution, this time under the aegis of the Wesleyan Methodist Church and its newly arrived missionary and cleric, John Smithees. The Perth Native School also opened in 1840, supported by unprecedented government funding for a religious organisation that was not part of the pre-eminent Church of England. Nevertheless, Hutt's support was entirely in accordance with the current desires of his imperial masters back in Britain.<sup>26</sup>

The explicit goal of this school was the long-term assimilation of the Aboriginal people by religious education and employment training of their children. Armstrong and his wife were more than just the head teacher and mistress. They were also responsible for feeding, clothing and sheltering pupils in their own home. Suitable students were farmed out to various settlers as servants and labourers. While welcoming the extra labour at a time of shortage, it was beyond the ability of the settler community to recognise the Aboriginal population as equals, which a shared Christian faith

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<sup>24</sup> 'Native Constables', *The Perth Gazette and Western Australian Journal*, 8 August 1840, p. 2.

<sup>25</sup> Charles Symmons, 'Quarterly Report', *The Perth Gazette and Western Australian Journal*, 9 January 1841 p. 2.

<sup>26</sup> Shipley, *Full Circle*, p. 31.

would demand they did. Even the Reverend Smithees had difficulty with this aspect of his mission, which he acknowledged when first rowed ashore at Perth by two Noongar boys in Francis Armstrong's boat. His intellectual application of theology was the only thing that overcame his ingrained cultural instincts. 'My vision and feelings were arrested, my sympathies excited, and fears only allayed by the remembrance "that of one blood hath God made" and that for these my Saviour died.'<sup>27</sup> Settler resistance was combined with Noongar reluctance to send any more children to school. A number of the children had died of either tuberculosis or influenza, both European diseases no doubt exacerbated by the cramped conditions of the Armstrong's dwelling. Armstrong lost one of his own children in December 1840. During September 1841 an Aboriginal child burned to death at the home. In mid 1843 Smithees relocated the school to the Wanneroo district for a fresh start, but the Armstrong family did not accompany him. Instead they moved to the town of Guildford to manage a store.

Armstrong remained as government interpreter to the native tribes until he was pensioned off in September 1882. His service as interpreter during court cases covered nearly half a century during which the jurisdiction of the court constantly expanded to regulate every aspect of the Aboriginal population's lives. On many occasions the outcome was the ultimate expression of the state's need to express its potency: the death penalty. Armstrong, with his long experience, could hardly have failed to realise that for many, if not most, of those he translated for had no understanding of the basic legal concepts by which they were sentenced to die. He could only be their translator, not an advocate. Others spoke out at this injustice but Armstrong remained silent. One of Armstrong's last acts as

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<sup>27</sup> Shipley, *Full Circle*, p. 27.



interpreter before he retired was to explain to the other prisoners what they were about to witness before the execution of a prisoner sentenced to hang on Rottnest Island. Between the years 1847 to 1849 Armstrong served as 'Moral Agent' for the Aboriginal prisoners being housed on Rottnest Island. His function was solely to instruct those prisoners in the particulars of the Christian faith. Some years later, another Protector of Natives could comment on how 'better informed' those tutored by Armstrong on Rottnest were on that subject.<sup>28</sup>

It is hard not to conclude that Armstrong, much as the Reverend Smithees had done, found in his Christian texts a moral justification for his continued involvement in a system that progressively degraded the status of those he had initially pledged to help. One of his first commissions as interpreter had been to create a translation of the Lord's Prayer into Wadjuk Noongar.<sup>29</sup> A text attributed to Armstrong dating from 1871 seems to describe a lesson plan where, in the Noongar language, Armstrong harangued his Aboriginal students, ascribing to them the responsibility for all the misfortunes that had befallen their people. If Armstrong truly believed what he was then saying, he must have entirely accepted the Christian dogma of original sin that cursed all humanity.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> William Cowan, 'Guardian of Aborigines' Report', *The Perth Gazette and Independent Journal of Politics and News*, 13 February 1852, p. 5.

<sup>29</sup> Moore and Cameron (ed.), *The Millendon Memoirs*, p. 448.

<sup>30</sup> Walker, 'Francis Armstrong', p. 8.

3.

### *The Education of Armstrong*

If Armstrong's adoption of the role as Interpreter had consequences not just for the Aboriginal people, but also within his own society, what were the consequences of his identification with the interests of the Wesleyan Methodist sect for the settler community and how had the settler infighting pushed Armstrong to identify his fortunes with the Methodist cause in the first place?

The issue was control of the colony by factions within the settler elite, and elite privilege and the status of religion had long been intertwined in British politics. This debate continued in the Swan River Colony. The monarch, of whom Lieutenant Governor James Stirling was the personal representative in Western Australia, was the head of the Church of England. The Anglican Church was integrated into the very fabric of the ruling power structure but this predominance did not automatically extend to the colonies. Stirling failed to include a cleric among his first settlers in 1829 and it was not until the following year that an Anglican chaplain arrived to take his place on the Imperial payroll. Reverend John Burdett Wittenoom remained the sole Church of England cleric in the colony for most of its first decade of existence.<sup>1</sup> He successfully blurred the line between spiritual authority and the interests of the ruling class through his service as Justice of the Peace, as well as running a school for the children of the colony's elite. The structure built in Perth, known as the Rush Church, and that which succeeded it in 1837 (still standing, now known as the Old Court House), were the venues

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<sup>1</sup> B. K. De Garis, 'Political Tutelage', in C. T. Stannage (ed.), *A New History of Western Australia* (Nedlands: University of Western Australia Press, 1981), p. 312.

from which Wittenoom could dole out religion, justice or education, depending on the day of the week.<sup>2</sup>

Wittenoom's conservative High Church theology made him instinctually distrustful of religious fervour, so while he unenthusiastically exercised his spiritual duties, active leadership of the Anglican interest fell to a number of dynamic (but by no means more competent) laymen including Frederick Irwin (Stirling's deputy), Robert Mackie and George Fletcher Moore. From Irwin's house in the Swan valley, on a rota, they shared lay-preaching duties on Sundays. Moore commissioned from Armstrong the translation of the Lord's Prayer into Noongar, and Irwin, during his time back in Britain, working with members of Moore's Irish family, raised money for a missionary to be sent to the colony for purpose of increasing the presence of the Anglican faith, and to convert the Aboriginal population to the Christian religion.<sup>3</sup>

'It is impossible to find Men and Women sunk lower in the scale of human society' was the plea on behalf of another sect made in July 1836 to the Wesleyan Missionary Society in London, part of a petition requesting a missionary preacher be sent to Western Australia.<sup>4</sup> The Methodists had made a similar request a few years earlier, but this time the application exploited the growing intellectual concern back in Britain about the condition of the Aboriginal populations within her empire. One month before, Dr Louis Guistiniani, an Italian former Roman Catholic priest who had converted to Anglicanism and whose doctorate was in medicine rather than theology, arrived in Western Australia with a number of catechists (lay preachers who would augment the teaching work of the ordained priest). He was sent by

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<sup>2</sup> Laadan Fletcher, 'Education of the People', in C. T. Stannage (ed.), *A New History of Western Australia* (Nedlands: University of Western Australia Press, 1981), pp. 551-552.

<sup>3</sup> Green, *A New History of Western Australia*, p. 86.

<sup>4</sup> Shipley, *Full Circle*, p. 22.

Irwin and represented the success of a sales pitch across Britain that teaching the Christian message could alleviate the 'gross heathen darkness' of the Aboriginal population. However it was the gross heathen darkness within the settler society that seized Guistiniani's attention and never relaxed its grip.<sup>5</sup>

The first sign that not all was well came when two of those catechists abandoned his service within days of their arrival at Fremantle. They later joined the Wesleyan congregation.<sup>6</sup> Guistiniani established a mission school in Guildford. It had been intended for the Aboriginal people of the area, much as the later school run by the Wesleyans in Perth would be, but instead it became the first battlefield between Guistiniani and the colonial elite. Guistiniani identified lack of Christian knowledge as a problem within the settler community so he concentrated his efforts on the education of settler's children. This was a slight among those who considered themselves to have been good Christians before Guistiniani's arrival. It was also a direct challenge to the authority of Wittenoom.<sup>7</sup> Guistiniani made disparaging remarks about the man who had recruited him, a reckless act that made a personal enemy out of Robert Mackie, not only Irwin's representative for the Missionary Society in Western Australia, but his cousin and brother-in-law as well.<sup>8</sup> Mackie, who was also the colony's senior magistrate, seemed to exact his revenge by attacking Guistiniani through his remaining catechist, Abraham Jones. But Jones had obtained on his own account, the enmity of some within the congregation who had embraced his predecessors, to the extent that when he in turn was marked as

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<sup>5</sup> Green, *A New History of Western Australia*, p. 86.

<sup>6</sup> Norma King, *The Waldeck Story* (Fremantle, WA: Community Publishing Project, 1980), p. 11.

<sup>7</sup> Louis Guistiniani, 'To the Editor of "The Perth Gazette"', *The Perth Gazette and Western Australian Journal*, 27 August 1836, p. 753;  
A Publican, 'Correspondence', *The Perth Gazette and Western Australian Journal*, 10 September 1836, p. 762.

<sup>8</sup> William Mackie, 'To the Editor of the Perth Gazette', *The Perth Gazette and Western Australian Journal*, 21 January 1837, p. 838.

a target, he could then accuse the Wesleyans of running a vendetta against him, accusing them of attempting to deprive him of the right to speak as a lay preacher in their chapel.<sup>9</sup>

The Wesleyan Methodist sect was a tiny minority among the colonists in Western Australia, probably numbering less than fifty members, and while identifying themselves as part of the Church of England, stood defiantly outside its control structures. They had revelled in their outsider status from the moment a significant number of adherents arrived in February 1830. After a long ship voyage to Australia, during which they had to stop handing out religious pamphlets to those trapped in steerage because they kept ripping them up, they adopted the tag of ‘ranter’ as a badge of honour much as their founder John Wesley had appropriated the jeer of ‘methodist’ in decades past.<sup>10</sup> But for the arrival of George Shenton in 1833 they may well have remained a minor annoyance to the Anglican hierarchy and those who wished for a quiet life.<sup>11</sup> Shenton rapidly became one of the most active, successful and wealthier merchants in the colony yet still found time to preach as a lay-person in the dissenting chapel and church he was largely responsible for funding, be secretary of the society formed to bring that Wesleyan missionary to Western Australia and open the colony’s first pharmacy. It was he who had been caught up in the raid on the flourmill in South Perth for which Armstrong’s early warnings had been ignored.

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<sup>9</sup> ‘Inquiry before W. H. Mackie and G. F. Moore, Esquires, at the instigation of Dr. Giustinani, Missionary’, *The Perth Gazette and Western Australian Journal*, 11 March, p. 865.

<sup>10</sup> Shipley, *Full Circle*, p. 5.

<sup>11</sup> Marian Aveling, ‘The Religious Aspect’, in C. T. Stannage (ed.), *A New History of Western Australia* (Nedlands: University of Western Australia Press, 1981), pp. 579-580; Shipley, *Full Circle*, p. 5, 9.

Armstrong and Shenton were also connected through the dissenting chapel's Sunday School that opened only a month later in July 1834.<sup>12</sup>

Armstrong's association with the Methodists would seem surprising, given that after he had been initially baptised in the Church of Scotland, he grew up in the shadow of the Church of England though his time in Wales and England. In these churches his brothers and sister had been christened and his mother buried. But around the Swan River colony in its first decade of existence it was the Methodists who got things done. It would be many years before Perth would get its own purpose-built Anglican Church. Wittenoom could do little else initially but tolerate the dissenters on his patch, even sharing their more advanced facilities. It was not an either/or situation for the Methodists, many attending both Wittenoom's services and then prayer meetings in their own chapel. Armstrong and Mary Ann Mews were married by a Church of England ceremony performed by Wittenoom on 1 August 1836.<sup>13</sup>

Not long after this, the attacks on Guistiniani, usually anonymous, made in the newspaper with the strongest connection to government, ramped up in frequency and viciousness. Guistiniani had declared that his mission around Guildford was an independent parish, again challenging Wittenoom. By January 1837 the breakdown of Guistiniani's relationship with Mackie and Irwin was being spread across the pages of the *Perth Gazette and Western Australian Journal*. James Stirling personally owned the press this newspaper was printed on, and its editor, proprietor and frequently sole journalist, Charles Macfaull, in addition to being the official government printer, was also the postmaster. Macfaull could be relied upon to express

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<sup>12</sup> 'Charge against the Natives', *The Perth Gazette and Western Australian Journal*, 3 May 1834, p. 278.

<sup>13</sup> Francis Armstrong, 'Classified Advertising', *The Perth Gazette and Western Australian Journal*, 6 August 1836, p. 740.

the ruling elite's position on most things. However Guistiniani had acquired an uncensored conduit for his own push back in the vehicle of the *Swan River Guardian*, which was launched by William Nairne Clark in October 1836. It was some time at the end of this year or the beginning of the next that Armstrong was drawn into the expanding campaign against Louis Guistiniani and his powerbase.<sup>14</sup>

Guistiniani can be located within a tradition of advocacy for the underdog and the speaking of unpalatable truths to power, particularly concerning the Aboriginal people, that began with Robert Lyon and was carried on by the Reverend John B. Gribble and his son in the latter half of the nineteenth-century, continuing in the twentieth and twenty-first by documentary film-makers such as Pilger, Rijavec and Harrison.<sup>15</sup> He called out the settler treatment of the Aboriginal people, including atrocities, murder, theft of land, legal discrimination and moral hypocrisy of those who professed to follow the Christian faith. Another aspect of this tradition that Guistiniani undoubtedly conformed with was the repudiation of his message by an overwhelming rejection of the messenger.<sup>16</sup> Assessing the validity of Guistiniani's specific charges against the settlers and their leadership over their treatment of the Aboriginal people is not within the scope of this thesis. However, to dismiss his claims as only related to a power struggle for control of the colony does not necessarily negate the truth of those claims, anymore than the counter position that he was attacked for his views

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<sup>14</sup> For example A Publican, 'Correspondence', *The Perth Gazette and Western Australian Journal*, 19 November 1836, p. 801; A Publican, 'To the Editor of the Perth Gazette.', *The Perth Gazette and Western Australian Journal*, 24 December 1836, p. 821.

<sup>15</sup> Green, *Aboriginal Australians and Christian Missions*, p. 156, pp 161-168; 'Exile and the Kingdom, prod/dir. Frank Rijavec, prod. Noelene Harrison, DVD (Sydney, NSW: Screen Australia, 2005);

'Utopia', DVD, dir. John Pilger (Brisbane, QLD: Antidote Films, 2014).

<sup>16</sup> Green, *A New History of Western Australia*, p. 86.

downplays the role his own personal idiosyncrasies played in sabotaging the delivery of both his message and any ability he had to effect change.

Much the same could be said about Clark. The *Swan River Guardian* provided a vital alternative voice to the government sympathies expressed by its rival. But one characteristic both he and Macfaull shared in common was that they were both excellent haters. Clarke remained the first and only person to kill another while fighting a duel in the colony. He was eventually acquitted of manslaughter for killing one of his business partners. Robert Mackie and George Fletcher Moore were both targets of his spleen largely for having succeeded in acquiring government jobs where he had failed. Stirling was also a target of his investigative journalism, as were any allegations of misdeeds or maladministration perpetrated by his government. The attempt made by the administration to silence his paper very much proved his point about their lack of competence. The financial surety Clark was forced to pay, ostensibly to cover any potential libel suits, had been set at a level calculated by Moore that Clark would never be able to afford. Instead, Guistiniani paid part of the deposit, and two of the administration's most vocal critics were locked into an even closer alliance. In May 1837, the effectiveness of the Mt Eliza Institution and Armstrong's role was the subject of a scathing article by Guistiniani in the *Guardian*. Clark followed up in subsequent issues lambasting Armstrong for occupying a sinecure and accusing him of being paid by the government for doing nothing.<sup>17</sup> That this was a planned and deliberate attack on Armstrong's reputation cannot be doubted. The meeting with Armstrong, which Guistiniani used as evidence,

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<sup>17</sup> Louis Guistiniani, 'Correspondence', *The Swan River Guardian*, 5 May 1837 p. 1; *The Swan River Guardian*, 1 June 1837 p. 146; 'Partnership Dissolved', *The Perth Gazette and Western Australian Journal*, 24 June 1837, p. 923.



had actually taken place at least five months earlier. The most likely cause for Guistiniani to have visited the Institution then, where he found Armstrong completely on his own, was in regards to issues with his catechist, Jones, whom Armstrong had been instructed to investigate.

The case of Abraham Jones reflects no credit on anyone involved and such is the nature of what that remains on the record makes it impossible to ascertain the true facts. Only ugly implications remain. Mackie in his position as Justice of the Peace, sent Armstrong to Guildford to investigate complaints made against Jones that he was abusing his position as teacher and engaging in sexual relations with Aboriginal women. Armstrong reported back that he had questioned witnesses that corroborated those reports and at some stage word of this investigation became public. Guistiniani demanded an official inquiry to clear the name not only of Jones, but of the institution he represented. When the tribunal met, consisting of Mackie and Moore with Armstrong giving evidence, responsibility for getting the Aboriginal witnesses from Guildford down to Perth rested with Guistiniani and those witnesses never arrived. Jones, speaking in his own defence, had the allegations dismissed. His counter-claim that Armstrong and the Methodist congregation were behind the accusations was never tested, and there was no further official investigation. Whatever the truth was, whether Armstrong was used by Mackie to indirectly attack Guistiniani, or Armstrong was acting on the partisan interests of his own religious sect, Armstrong was very much now embroiled in the political fight.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> 'Inquiry before W. H. Mackie and G. F. Moore, Esquires, at the instigation of Dr. Giustiniani, Missionary', *The Perth Gazette and Western Australian Journal*, 11 March, p. 865.

The essence of the charge that Guistiniani attempted to subvert colonial leadership by communicating directly to Stirling's superior back in London doesn't really hold weight given that Guistiniani had no true authority as a non-British subject. His application for citizenship was rejected at about the same time that the two German former catechists named Waldeck were granted theirs. As a foreigner, Guistiniani was unable to own assets in the colony and the return of Irwin, now promoted to Major, with the authority to withhold Guistiniani's pay packet, was all the leverage required to induce him to retire. Guistiniani withdrew his financial support for Clark, and left the colony in February 1838. The last issue of the *Guardian* was published that same month. Nevertheless, Stirling's decision not to extend his own term as governor, and the abandonment of the Mount Eliza Native Institution can be linked to the pressures placed on both by Guistiniani and Clark.<sup>19</sup>

The arrival of Stirling's successor in January 1839 changed completely the balance of power and influence within the colonial hierarchy. It was Armstrong's unprecedented personal access to Governor John Hutt (who was, like himself, a person somewhat detached from the body of the ruling clique), which precipitated the rise in fortunes of the Wesleyan church as well as its permanent estrangement from the Anglicans. Hutt arrived from England with a policy to integrate the Aboriginal population into a single society under British law.<sup>20</sup> As he was faced with an acute shortage of labour, an Aboriginal work force could also relieve this need. He revisited the scheme created in desperation under the Stirling administration to send Aboriginal prisoners to Rottneest island as an alternative to hanging them. He

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<sup>19</sup> Bruce Devenish, 'A Most Maligned Man', *Early Days*, volume 12, part 2, 2008, pp 168-169.

<sup>20</sup> Shipley, *Full Circle*, p. 31.

appended to it the education and training aspects of the Mount Eliza Institution. Armstrong was not immediately transferred to the island; instead gaoler Henry Vincent adopted his role as Superintendent. In September 1839 the Governor and the Interpreter intervened together to halt a running battle on Perth's streets between Noongar factions. As the spears were confiscated, those still in possession took the opportunity to attack those who had been disarmed. It was a painful demonstration of the dissonance between Hutt's intentions and the consequences of his directives. Hutt rescinded Armstrong's uncomfortable position as constable, foisted on him by the previous regime, when the policy of appointing Aboriginal people themselves as policemen was implemented.<sup>21</sup>

Hutt would continue to demonstrate that results were what mattered to him rather than who achieved them. The previous month, naval officer and explorer Lieutenant George Grey rushed to print a 'Vocabulary of The Aboriginal Language of Western Australia' with the Governor's full encouragement. It came out under Grey's name, despite the ongoing work that Hutt, in close collaboration with both Armstrong and Moore, was making on a similar work, eventually published in London by Moore.<sup>22</sup> When Hutt's administration started funding the Wesleyan Mission to run their Aboriginal school by August 1840, this was unprecedented government support for a sect that was not the Church of England. Manifestations of resentment from within the elite included the colonial chaplain Wittenoom, who denounced the Wesleyans as 'schismatics' from his pulpit, unleashing a wave of petty violence against them. Moore engineered the exclusion of

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<sup>21</sup> Green and Moon, *Far from Home*, pp 14-15; 'Native Constables', *The Perth Gazette and Western Australian Journal*, 8 August 1840, p. 2; 'Native Fight', *The Perth Gazette and Western Australian Journal*, 28 September 1839, p. 154.

<sup>22</sup> George Grey, 'Vocabulary Of The Aboriginal Language Of Western Australia', *The Perth Gazette and Western Australian Journal*, 24 August 1839, p. 135; Moore and Cameron (ed.), *The Millendon Memoirs*, p. 461.

John Smithees, the newly arrived Wesleyan missionary, from any further government support.<sup>23</sup>

The correlation between Armstrong's involvement in the Aboriginal School project and the long-term future of the independent Wesleyan church associated with it, is acknowledged in a stained glass window in the church building erected by a later generation in Perth. By contrast, George Shenton, whose family actually paid for that structure, only receives a brass plaque on the wall. Even the petty violence, which was swiftly suppressed by the court, only enhanced the Wesleyan's sense of unity as a persecuted minority. They were 'the only steadfast witnesses God has put in the land' the Reverend Smithees wrote in his diary of October 1840.<sup>24</sup> Government funding for the Wesleyan mission did not survive Hutt's tenure as governor, nor did the school flourish after the resignation of Armstrong and his wife as schoolteachers. Nevertheless, Armstrong remained an acknowledged secular leader of the church in Perth for the rest of his life.<sup>25</sup>

Armstrong's unwitting role in the establishment of universal state education in Western Australia is one of the few positive outcomes of the unholy rivalry between sectarian European interests. After Hutt's successor died in office, Irwin once again assumed the governorship, and Moore became his colonial secretary. It was in their partisan interest to check the influence of the Roman Catholic Church whose own schools opened in the colony after 1845 and catered both for Aborigines and those Anglican settlers neglected by Wittenoom's establishment. In retaliation, Irwin

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<sup>23</sup> Shipley, *Full Circle*, p. 30.  
'School for the Natives', *The Perth Gazette and Western Australian Journal*, 8 August 1840, p. 2;

Shipley, *Full Circle*, p. 29;  
John Smithees, "To the Editor of the "Inquirer", *Inquirer*, 30 September 1840, p. 35.

<sup>24</sup> Shipley, *Full Circle*, p. 28.

<sup>25</sup> Shipley, *Full Circle*, pp. 35-36, 38.

provided state funding to expand Wittenoom's efforts in the field. He also sent Armstrong to Rottnest Island for the religious education of the Aboriginal prisoners held there.

Armstrong sent to Rottnest represented the final attempt by the first generation of political leadership for the colony to creatively employ Armstrong's talents in addition to those as interpreter, combining religion and education. The next administration had less interest in religious politics and terminated the Rottnest Island project in its entirety while extending education funding to include the Catholic system. Education and religion had been inextricably bound together since the colony's foundation. The monopoly of the Anglican Church's state funding was broken by the support given to the Wesleyan school, and this was a political genie that would not go back into its bottle. Francis Armstrong cannot be held solely responsible for the system of universal education now in Australia or the degree to which religious organisations are currently supported by the state. His personal involvement in the affairs of church and education mixed in with Aboriginal issues did advance the debate in his own time.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Green and Moon, *Far from Home*, pp. 21-22; Fletcher, *A New History of Western Australia*, pp. 554-555.

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### *Stuck on the island with the Cyclops*

The stained glass window in the Wesleyan Church, Perth, a commemorative plaque on one of the city's pavements, the name of a cottage, and the name of a bay on the north coast of the Rottnest Island are all physical reminders of Francis Armstrong's life in Western Australia. The grave he shares with his wife and the accompanying tombstone, are rare survivors in the Old East Perth Cemetery that is the final resting place for many of the earliest British arrivals to Western Australia. But there are also less tangible traces of his life that remain in the form of myths and legends that have grown up around him and his family. The Aboriginal dreamtime stories preserve the culture and legacy of their people, while the myths of ancient Greece have outlasted their civilisation by many thousands of years. However, as well as evolving over time from some long forgotten factual source, myths can be artificially created, and older myths re-purposed for some new cause. Thus has been the case for Francis Armstrong.

The Cyclops was a mythical creature with only one eye. A bestial Cyclops imprisoned the hero Odysseus and his men on an island in an ancient Greek poem attributed to Homer. The Cyclops in this tradition was not only vicious and cruel but also so monstrously strong and powerful it could only be bested by trickery. Invoking this myth is relevant through the coincidence of the number of actual one eyed men in positions of strength and power who cross the narrative path of Armstrong's story. Coincidence at first, this quirk of history was eventually fictionalised, expanded and exploited in a process that transformed Armstrong into a mythological figure in his own right. The spectre of the Cyclops was raised in descriptions of

*Noona*, '[one] of the most desperate men of the tribe', a leader from the Pinjar Noongar who was a casualty at Pinjarra in 1834. A settler account of the battle recorded his defining characteristic as having only a single eye. This is worth noting as much for the implied correlation of moral and physical disfigurement that was so much a component of the European worldview as it was for invoking the analogy of a mythical past.<sup>1</sup>

*Koko-but* (one-eyed) was the name given allegedly to Henry Vincent by the Aboriginal prisoners in his care.<sup>2</sup> Vincent was gaoler first at Fremantle, then for Aboriginal prisoners sent to Rottnest Island, replacing Governor Stirling's initial appointment (who, similar to Robert Lyon on Carnac Island some years previously, had permitted all his prisoners to escape from his custody). He remained on Rottnest under Stirling's successor Hutt, operating under new instructions to provide vocational training. He was the subject of at least two formal investigations into charges of brutality and mistreatment against Aboriginal prisoners in his care. Yet despite tentative criticism from Armstrong who had a principal role in those investigations, and misgivings expressed by the governor himself, Vincent was cleared on all charges.<sup>3</sup> That Rottnest under Vincent's inspectorship was a place of terror, the legend of which spread to the mainland, was confirmed by the settlers themselves when an upsurge in conflict between British and Noongar was attributed in part to diminishment of the fear of being sent to Rottnest. It was mistakenly being reported that Francis Armstrong was going to replace Vincent on the island as superintendent. Instead Armstrong was

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<sup>1</sup> 'The Natives', *The Perth Gazette and Western Australian Journal*, 11 April 1835, p. 475.

<sup>2</sup> Watson, *Rottnest, Its Tragedy And Its Glory*, p23.

<sup>3</sup> Green and Moon, *Far from Home*, pp. 20-21.

sent to augment Vincent's work by bringing religious instruction to the prisoners.<sup>4</sup>

The myth of Armstrong and Vincent's clash is largely the creation of Edward Jack Watson, who could have been present only at the very end of Armstrong's Rottnest experience. Armstrong was on Rottnest Island between 1847 and 1848. In 1849 the prison closed. In 1855 after a hiatus of six years, a new regime of Aboriginal incarceration commenced. Any utopian notions of education for the prisoners were discarded apart from the lesson of repression. In 1880, Armstrong briefly returned to the island and was present outside the prison complex known as the Quod to exhort to the prisoners the moral example of what they were about to see prior to one of their number's execution. Vincent, although he also had returned as superintendent after the prison's revival, was long since retired before Watson, the son of a government employee could have been present. Furthermore, at this time of Armstrong's visit to Rottnest (Armstrong's last), Watson could have been only nine to ten years old. Nonetheless, Watson's pen portrait of Armstrong during what would prove to also be one of Armstrong's last duties performed by him as a government agent, is credible simply because he could have been there. Less credible are his portraits of Armstrong and Vincent's co-habitation on the island during the two years up to December 1848.<sup>5</sup>

Watson's account was published posthumously in a redacted form that obscures the author's presumed intent to create a work of fiction, fleshing out the backstory of his childhood on Rottnest. Watson's original manuscript includes a dialogue between Vincent and Armstrong on the occasion of Armstrong's final departure from the island where the Moral

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<sup>4</sup> *Inquirer*, 26 May 1847, p. 2.

<sup>5</sup> Watson, *Rottnest, Its Tragedy And Its Glory*, p. 73.



Agent implores the Superintendent for greater leniency to be shown to the prisoners only to be denounced by Vincent as a ‘palm[sic] singing hypocrite’.<sup>6</sup> If this is a historical account, it is history in the mode of Thucydides or a medieval chronicler inventing the political speeches of kings and generals on the eve of battle to illustrate intent rather than record what was actually said. That there was friction between the two when Armstrong was posted there is paradoxically confirmed by a contemporary newspaper report denying any rift existed and a government missive to both parties re-iterating the demarcation line between the roles assigned to them.

This letter from George Fletcher Moore also proves that Armstrong’s additional duties as storekeeper on Rottnest were a condition of his employment from the first and not part of a vindictive scheme by Vincent to distract Armstrong from interfering with his Native Institution.<sup>7</sup> Likewise, Armstrong being deprived of the house he had built for himself and his family at the settlement near both the store and the prison and instead being transferred to the half-unfinished lighthouse some miles away towards the centre of the island, was entirely the result of a change of policy on behalf of a new government. The new Governor, Fitzgerald, saw no value in any of the Rottnest institutions as they stood. He also wanted a holiday home on the site. Armstrong may well have left the island for health reasons, but Fitzgerald closed the whole Aboriginal prison complex and sent Vincent back to Fremantle only a few months after that.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Walker, *Early Personalities at Rottnest*, p. 11.

<sup>7</sup> *Inquirer*, 10 November 1847, p. 2;

*Inquirer*, 8 December 1847, p. 3;

Walker, *Early Personalities at Rottnest*, pp. 9-10;

Green and Moon, *Far from Home*, p. 22.

<sup>8</sup> Watson, *Rottnest*, pp. 32-33;

Green and Moon, *Far from Home*, p. 22;

Ronald Jack Ferguson, *Rottnest Island history and architecture* (Nedlands, WA: University of Western Australia Press, 1986), pp. 26-28.

That Vincent had only one eye resonates with the Cyclops legend. In this interpretation of the myth, Watson's account paints Armstrong as a tragic figure defeated by the monster. Vincent's Aboriginal name implies he did in fact have only a single eye, but how he acquired this physiognomy is also part of a mythology. Uncertainty on the historical record regarding this fact has created the opportunity for new myths to be created, conflating Vincent's association with Armstrong to manufacture a whole new Cyclops legend but this time involving Armstrong's father, Adam. Watson asserts that Vincent had been badly wounded in the Napoleonic wars fighting as a soldier. By implication, it was at the battle of Waterloo in 1815 that he lost his eye.<sup>9</sup> The exact same claim is made by other authors on behalf of Armstrong, but for Adam Pearson Armstrong, even more detail is provided. The story goes — He was a captain and commanded a named Scottish regiment under Wellington's command and that his eye had been cut out by one of Napoleon's soldiers.<sup>10</sup>

For two men (Vincent aged eighteen and Armstrong twenty-seven at the time) to both have received identical wounds on the same battlefield, only to be linked again many years later by a psychological duel fought between the younger of them and the other's son, is dramatically satisfying but historically problematical. The evidence for both assertions needs to be assessed. If Vincent was suffering post-traumatic stress disorder as a result of his war experience that might provide a compelling theory to explain the harsh and brutal behaviour he sometimes displayed towards his Aboriginal prisoners. The battle of Waterloo was well documented regarding the names

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<sup>9</sup> Watson, *Rottnest, Its Tragedy And Its Glory*, p. 23; Ferguson, *Rottnest Island*, p 13.

<sup>10</sup> Hugh Kalyptus, 'Some Old Time Memories', *Western Mail*, 21 January 1916, p. 48; J. K. Hitchcock, *The History of Fremantle The Front Gate of Australia 1829-1929* (Fremantle: S. H. Lamb Printing House, 1929), p. 16.

of officers and cavalrymen present. Vincent's name is not among those so recorded. This does not rule out Vincent being present in another capacity or even being involved in some other conflict of the period. His youth increased the likelihood of him being misreported or overlooked entirely in the surviving documentation. Vincent's poor handwriting and spelling demonstrated in official documents indicate that he was semi-literate at best, and may have been unable to record himself at all in his earlier years. So Vincent's veteran status is plausible, even if it is not conclusively proven.<sup>11</sup>

The claims for Adam Armstrong's military past would seem to be stronger. One of the more tangible pieces of evidence was a published image claimed to be of him that appears to depict a man with something strange about his eye. Also, a search in the records of those attested to be at Waterloo return the name of Armstrong as a captain on Wellington's personal staff, in addition to other possible matches among the leadership of other regiments present. However, this is where the trail of evidence ends its support of a military career. Further research demonstrates that the staff officer's first name was William, and he survived the conflict unscathed. The next closest match was the captain of a Scottish regiment, but his name was Archibald and he did not command Ayrshire troops as Armstrong's father was implied to have done. He was likewise uninjured. Of all the possibilities called Armstrong, none proved to have the first name Adam, nor were any wounded (although one was killed).<sup>12</sup> The whole edifice of a glorious military career completely collapses when the chronology of the last years of the Napoleonic war are correlated with Armstrong's activities as a

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<sup>11</sup> Walker, *Early Personalities at Rottneest*, p. 2, 12.

<sup>12</sup> Charles Dalton, *The Waterloo Roll Call*, 2nd edn., (London: Arms & Armour Press, 1978), p. 3, 279.

Anon, *The Waterloo Medal Roll Compiled from the Muster Rolls* (Darlington, East Sussex: The Naval & Military Press, 1992). pp. 1-404.

coal mine proprietor in Edinburgh. He was fighting to forestall bankruptcy only months before the battle was fought on 18 June 1815.<sup>13</sup>

There was not the time nor had Armstrong the opportunity to pursue a military career to the rank and prestige that was attributed to him. Even that image of Adam Armstrong, first published in a 1929 booklet that suggested damage to his eye, can now be demonstrated to be a heavily retouched image of one of his sons (also named Adam). The original version of this late-nineteenth-century photograph is preserved in the collection of the State library in Western Australia. His eye is intact.<sup>14</sup> If Francis Armstrong's father had been fraudulently representing himself to be a Waterloo veteran, this would have added an extra frisson to the conflict between Vincent and himself. Unfortunately, to the detriment of the melodrama, there is no record that he ever did so, or that this claim for him was ever made during Adam (both father and son's) lifetime, Francis's, or any of their other siblings. Nor could it have been, as authentic veterans of the conflict were present in the colony, such as Captain Richard Goldsmith Meares, one of the most prominent of Thomas Peel's settlers, who arrived on the same boat as Armstrong as his family in 1829.<sup>15</sup>

Was the invention of a military career for Francis's father just a case of accidentally conflating historical coincidences, such as confusing Armstrong senior with Vincent, or mistaking him for the other Captain Armstrong whose tenure in the colony was contemporaneous with his? William Henry Armstrong was a soldier in the 21<sup>st</sup> regiment. He was for a time in command of all the military in Western Australia. This rank brought

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<sup>13</sup> 'Scots Bankrupts', *Caledonian Mercury*, 25 March 1815, p. 1.

<sup>14</sup> Hitchcock, *The History of Fremantle*, p. 68; Stirling family collection of photographs, State Library of Western Australia (4153B Vols. 87-88)

<sup>15</sup> Hasluck, *Thomas Peel of Swan River*, p. 83, 249.

with it a place on both the governing legislative and executive councils under Stirling, which the Captain eventually had to relinquish to Irwin when he returned to the colony in August 1837.<sup>16</sup> He had no family connection with Adam or Francis, yet the confusion in the historical record was most likely due to his coincidental association with Thomas Peel. It was the Captain's servant, called Nesbit, whose death provided one of the pretexts for the punitive campaign against the Pindjar Noongar, coordinated with Peel, that culminated at Pinjarra in October 1834. This Captain Armstrong also was a signatory on the petition calling for the closure of the Mount Eliza Native Institution in October 1838, one of thirty-two names (including that of George Shenton) that confused the issue of Francis Armstrong's own involvement in the winding up of this institution and his subsequent appointment as Native Constable that so damaged his standing with the Noongar.<sup>17</sup>

The remaining question to be answered is two fold: Who created such a distortion in the historical record and for what purpose? The first published appearance of Adam Armstrong's fictitious war history occurs in a newspaper article of January 1916, written under the pseudonym of *Hugh Kalyptus*. The gist of this most detailed account is included in an official history of the city of Fremantle compiled to commemorate the centenary of settler arrival in 1929. This publication was also the source of the portrait of Adam Armstrong junior, altered to represent his father. The common factor linking these two items was real-estate agent and newspaper proprietor Horace George Stirling. He was the son of Edmund Stirling who had owned

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<sup>16</sup> 'From the Government Gazette', *The Perth Gazette and Western Australian Journal*, 26 August 1837, p. 959;

Moore and Cameron, *The Millendon Memoirs*, p. 427.

<sup>17</sup> 'Murder perpetrated by the Murray River Natives', *The Perth Gazette and Western Australian Journal*, 26 July 1834, p. 326;

Bates, 'Battle of Pinjarra', p. 42;

Statham Drew, *Governor Stirling*, pp. 363-364.

the Perth *Inquirer* newspaper (but was not in any way related to the colony's first governor despite sharing the same family name). Horace Stirling was married to Maria Elizabeth Armstrong, a daughter of Adam Armstrong junior. The original unaltered photograph of his father-in-law was retained in a collection of Stirling family photographs held by the state library. Stirling had been associated with the pseudonym of Hugh Kalyptus since at least 1904 and a compilation of articles was issued under the by-line featuring both names together.<sup>18</sup> His connection to the Armstrong family was reinforced through an elder brother, Edmund Stirling junior, who married a daughter of Francis Armstrong. This is an important point, for the distortion of the Armstrong family record through the Stirling family's writings affected not just the elder Adam Armstrong but the assessment of Francis Armstrong as well.<sup>19</sup>

The most egregious example concerns Hugh Kalyptus's account of the deaths of Noongar leaders Midgegooroo and Yagan, first published in 1918 and expanded upon in 1920. He attributes to Francis Armstrong the preservation of Yagan's severed head, creating an object that was then used to reinforce the sense of British superiority over their Aboriginal neighbours by reducing one of their strongest leaders to the level of a curio in a museum exhibition. Stirling (or Kalyptus) talks of Yagan in terms of being 'a noble specimen of the Australian savage'. Armstrong's reputation as a semi-professional taxidermist was invoked by Stirling to be at one with his duties as Aboriginal interpreter: 'Francis Fraser Armstrong, our first official

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<sup>18</sup> Hugh Kalyptus, 'Some Old Time Memories', *Western Mail*, 21 January 1916, p. 48; A. E. Williams, *Nedlands: From Campsite to City* (Nedlands, WA: City of Nedlands, 1984), p. 162;

H. G. Stirling, and H. Kalyptus, Collection of His Newspaper Articles Published 1904-1927 in Series "Western Australia :E: Historical Events and Personalities" and "WA in Days Lang Syne", under Pseudonyms H. And Hugh Kalyptus].

[[https://books.google.com.au/books/about/Collection\\_of\\_His\\_Newspaper\\_Articles\\_Pub.html](https://books.google.com.au/books/about/Collection_of_His_Newspaper_Articles_Pub.html)] retrieved 30 May 2015.

<sup>19</sup> Armstrong, *Adam Armstrong*, p. 145, 36.

interpreter of the native language, and our first embalmer of animals, birds and reptiles.<sup>20</sup> Yagan was killed adjacent to the property of George Fletcher Moore in the Swan Valley. A few days later, on 13 July 1833, Moore visited his neighbours and admired their grisly trophy, even wishing that he could have possessed it for himself. He described in his diary how the preserver of the head also flayed the body to recover a distinctive tattoo on Yagan's shoulder. Five months later Moore employed the same man as a shepherd on his own estate.

Only after Armstrong's death in 1897 do accounts begin stating that he was an employee of Moore (sometimes as storekeeper, an occupation he actually performed for Georges Leake and Shenton). No such claim was made in Moore's diary, nor is there any other record that Moore owned a store. Moore gives the name of his shepherd employee as William Dodd.<sup>21</sup> Facts about Armstrong were being altered to fit some new narrative. The mythmaking of the Stirling family extended beyond Horace and included Edmund (although whether it was the father or the brother is not clear from the source). Moore reported during the execution of Midgegoroo that the firing squad shot him in the head and body. From this brief portrait of a man tied to the door of a gaol, Stirling produced the following account for a chronicle of the colony's fortunes published in 1893:

Though Midgegoroo's both eyes were shot out he showed fearful malice towards the soldiers, evincing that bitter hatred and the brutal passion were strong in death, by struggling hard to grapple with his captors and wreak vengeance upon them before he died.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Hugh Kalyptus, 'The Late John Nicol Drummond', *Western Mail*, 15 November 1918, p. 41;

Hugh Kalyptus, 'Old Time Memories', *Western Mail*, 12 February 1920, p. 4.

<sup>21</sup> Moore and Cameron, *The Millendon Memoirs*, p. 258, 299;

'Death of Mr. F. F. Armstrong', *The West Australian*, 24 May 1897, p. 2.

<sup>22</sup> Moore and Cameron, *The Millendon Memoirs*, p. 233.

Odysseus blinded the Cyclops to escape from his captivity, so too was the resistance of Aboriginal people to European domination now presented as a monster that had to be suppressed.

Francis Armstrong's reputation as a friend to the Aboriginal people had to be called into question, as a new society being created in Western Australia could no longer tolerate any duality of loyalties. In 1890, when Francis Armstrong was seventy-seven years old, he had been retired from government service for ten years and a widower for four. This was the year that responsible government was granted to the colony, transferring decision-making authority over its people from London finally to Western Australia. Paradoxically, this increase in local autonomy coincided with a new threat to the Western Australian elite's monopoly on power caused by the massive influx of settlers from the eastern colonies drawn to the gold finds in the east of the colony. During the celebrations for the granting of responsible government, Armstrong's role in the history of the colony was re-defined for one final time during his lifetime. He was paraded in triumph down the streets of the capital, his place in the procession a carefully planned metaphor for the value of his class in the new colonial order. The order had the heads of the various Christian faiths now established in the territory followed by 'six old colonists' of whom Armstrong was pre-eminent, in turn followed by the old legislative council, judiciary, city leaders and only then the general public. Armstrong had become the embodiment of a new Western Australian elite so defined to exclude the next wave of migrants from positions of authority.<sup>23</sup>

Nonetheless, ten years later, the numerical pressure of those immigrants had successfully induced Western Australia to become part of

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<sup>23</sup> 'Inauguration Of The New Constitution', *The West Australian*, 23 October 1890, p. 3.



the Commonwealth of Australia, defying the wishes of the elite to remain independent. Amid the conflicting loyalties to different colonies or now states, or to a theoretical Australian nation state, the wider umbrella of the British Empire was the one consistent unifying force by which an identity could be maintained at this difficult period of transition. Increasingly, the identity of the British Empire was defined in military terms. Contingents of soldiers from the disparate Australian colonies departed for Imperial service overseas in South Africa, only to return as citizens of an Australian nation that had not previously existed. Francis Armstrong did not live to see the Australian federation born. He died on 22 May 1897.

The misrepresentation of the place Francis Armstrong (and that of his father) occupies in the historical record as a result of the myths that have been created to further a particular agenda can be explained in the context of Western Australian society during the early part of the twentieth century. These enshrined the disabilities the Aboriginal population suffered at the hands of the settlers into law, and responded to the challenge of total war that the state was subsumed into by the outbreak of the Great War in 1914. The invention of Adam Armstrong's military career can be seen as part of a propaganda campaign to raise the morale on the home front, even as his great-grandsons were dying some thousands of miles away on a distant battlefield in Europe. After the war, the fact that fifty of his descendants had served in the conflict was appended to the narrative of his fictitious service.<sup>24</sup> In the case of Francis Armstrong, his reputation as a friend to the Aborigines was downplayed, for example by conflating his activities as interpreter and taxidermist, at the same time, the role of religion in his life was overplayed to avoid the uncomfortable concern that he was raising actual moral

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<sup>24</sup> Hitchcock, *The History of Fremantle*, p. 16.

quandaries in his work, rather than just obeying doctrinal necessities. It was necessary to conceal the place that Aboriginal people found themselves in the new country that Armstrong had also helped to create.

A unique set of circumstances brought Armstrong to the position where he could be an intermediary between his British community and the Aboriginal people whose lands they were usurping. Throughout his life he was manipulated by various factions within all the communities he was involved in, all seeking to exploit best the unique skills and prestige he brought to their opposing camps. Death was not the end for Francis Armstrong. The duel for his legacy lived on.

## *Conclusion*

Armstrong emerged from the British society that existed in Western Australia, not only to be one of the first Europeans conversant in the Noongar dialect as spoken by the local Aboriginal population, but the only one at that time in 1834, who also had the trust and confidence of both communities. This placed Armstrong in a unique position to be an interpreter between the Wadjuk Noongar and settlers, in his own words, ‘to do good.’<sup>1</sup>

His own Scottish cultural background and the place both his maternal grandfather and great-grandfather occupied within the historical movement to preserve that culture from English hegemony provided him with examples of both the preservation process and how the preserver might be praised for this good work. However Armstrong’s expression of Scottish identity also encapsulated a dual identity as part of a greater British Empire. Armstrong’s subsequent career suggests that this ‘North British’ identity that aligned him firmly with the interests of his fellow settlers ultimately prevailed over the alternate vision of a Scotland as victim of English aggression. Robert Lyon, contemporary to Armstrong, presented this alternative as an explicit analogy to the situation then existing between settlers and Noongar. Armstrong’s religious sensibilities were only manifest later in his public career, so cannot be ascribed as the motivation for him to cultivate his relationships with the Noongar, although it was certainly a factor in him choosing to continue that association later on. Armstrong’s interest in the natural world, expressed by his recording of natural history and taxidermy, correlated strongly with that part of Noongar religious practice that centred on knowledge of land and the understanding of the

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<sup>1</sup> Armstrong, *The Perth Gazette and Western Australian Journal*, 29 October 1836, p. 789.

environment. This was most likely the common ground that first created the connection between Armstrong and they.

The response by all parties to the discovery of Armstrong's talents, eventually resulted in the deterioration of his relationship with the Noongar from a place of mutual respect, through mutual disappointment and antagonism, to the arrival at a new balance defined by Armstrong's religious beliefs and his role within the settler hierarchy that was complicit in the suppression of Noongar interests. Although Noongar disillusionment with Armstrong due his failure to advocate their position also fed back into Armstrong's own changing attitude towards those same people, the unwillingness or inability of the various colonial administrations to follow through on any sort of policy that might compromise the interests of the British settlers, whether those interests were economic, legal or social, sabotaged every attempt that involved Armstrong exploiting the trust he was initially perceived to possess. The Mount Eliza Native Establishment and its successor, the Perth Native School, both failed from the rejection by the settlers of the implications of equality (or at least recognition of a potentially non-subservient place within settler society) for Aboriginal people that the success of these institutions promised. His appointment as Moral Agent to the prisoners on Rottnest Island represented the last attempt by government to exploit Armstrong's standing before the entire paradigm between settler and Aboriginal changed with the arrival of convict labour.

Armstrong's involvement in the machinations of settler politics, through the desire by the various factions within the colonial hierarchy to exploit his skills, or of others to attack those exploiting his skills, inevitably required him to align himself with one particular set of interests for the purpose of his own self-preservation. Armstrong's choice meant that when

the balance of power finally shifted within the colonial establishment, it was the Wesleyan Methodist congregation that benefited most from his close working relationship with the new governor, Hutt. This was a historically significant event for which Armstrong should be remembered, not that he aided the ephemeral fortunes of a church, but that the precedent of government funding the Wesleyan Native School broke the Church of England's monopoly on state support, and initiated a chain of events culminating in a system of compulsory secular education within the colony. This was one indirect positive, if inadvertent, outcome of Armstrong's desire to promote the welfare of the Aboriginal people (as he saw it) that did survive the change of government administration and the conversion of the colony into a penal settlement in June 1850.

Armstrong's life during the convict era and after deserves further study that is outside the scope of this thesis to provide. His career as a teacher encompassed that of prisoners at the convict establishment in Fremantle; there were the mercantile interests pursued both by himself and his brothers in Fremantle, Perth and the development of the new settlement eventually known as Geraldton. Armstrong's long civic career with the city of Perth included the essential but decidedly non-glamorous role as rate collector; minutiae of this role surviving in council records proved to be far more intriguing than there was any right to expect they would be. Armstrong's interests in taxidermy, referred to here only in the context of his connection with Noongar culture, show evidence of Armstrong's connection to a wider body of formal European study of natural history in Australia

during the nineteenth century. The full extent and significance of his contribution to this field had yet to be investigated.<sup>2</sup>

But it is primarily in reference to the Aboriginal people of Western Australia that Armstrong's historical legacy is measured today. Interpretation of that legacy varied with the changing prejudices over the one hundred and eighteen years since his death. Facts that related to Armstrong's actions were altered to match those prejudices during the first decades of the twentieth century, in line with the propaganda associated with the militarisation of Australian society in that period around the First World War. It is important to draw attention to this deliberate falsification, for these documents remain as part of the historical record in newspapers and books, and can easily be mistaken for actual primary evidence.<sup>3</sup>

The legacy of Francis Fraser Armstrong is that of a footnote in the troubled history of the relationship between the European arrivals and the Aboriginal people of Western Australia. His skills as an interpreter and the sympathy he was said to possess for the Aboriginal people have to be set against his support for the institutions that comprehensively failed to promote their interests. Worst of all, Armstrong's involvement, however well meaning, provided a propaganda shield for those working actively against the interests of the Aboriginal population. In the words of an old aphorism: 'The road to hell is paved with good intentions.'

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<sup>2</sup> 'Domestic Sayings and Doings', *The Perth Gazette and Independent Journal of Politics and News*, 4 July 1851, p. 2;

'Perth City Council', *The Inquirer and Commercial News*, 6 November 1867, p. 2;

'Classified Advertising', *The Perth Gazette and West Australian Times*, 2 December 1864, p. 2.

<sup>3</sup> For example: Edmund Stirling, 'Chapters on the Early History of Western Australia', *The Inquirer and Commercial News*, 18 August 1893, p. 27.

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