

CHAPTER 3

On Paternalisms and Aboriginal Agency

From missions to neoliberal policy in the work of
Richard Broome and Noel Pearson

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In 2006, paternalism emerged as a keyword in discussions of the Howard Government's Indigenous Affairs policy, but, though cited frequently, it was an unstable signifier. Was 'paternalism' a slur, condemning an antiquated approach to Indigenous Affairs and distancing an enlightened present from the outdated past? Or was it a valid policy setting, as relevant today as it had been in the 1950s? Though this divergence was largely uninterrogated at the time, at least two prominent public intellectuals had begun to reconsider the term. That same year, 2006, Richard Broome published a powerful exploration of what he termed the 'two-way dynamic' of paternalism on Coranderrk station, an approach that fundamentally rethought the way that paternalism took form in the mission era. And the previous year the Cape York Indigenous leader Noel Pearson had meditated on the difficulties surrounding the term while at the same time advocating an explicitly paternalist social policy. This set the two of them apart from the many other public commentators and historians who, in the context of the history wars, deployed the term either to endorse or condemn past relationships between white authorities and Indigenous Australians. Many framed it in a negative light, as a system of domination and control. Others understood it as signifying 'fatherly' authority exercised benevolently in a family-like situation, with the non-Indigenous

missionary, employer, policeman, bureaucrat or politician occupying the paternal role. In both of these accounts, paternalism was cast as a system crafted by an all-determining paternal figure, the only serious actor to whom one need pay attention. However, for both Pearson and Broome (in subtly different ways), Aboriginal people past and present have actively shaped the development of paternalist relationships, rendering these relationships dynamic syntheses of Indigenous and settler traditions.

These profound definitional disagreements have serious consequences both for our understanding of historical relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people and for the terrain of contemporary Australian politics. Nonetheless, despite the prominence of the term in popular debate a decade ago and its continued currency today, these consequences have provoked surprisingly little scholarly reflection.¹ In this chapter we argue that placing the historiographical debate alongside the contemporary popular one offers new insights into both fields of inquiry. The work of Richard Broome and Noel Pearson is our focus, and because both Broome and Pearson developed their theories of paternalism primarily (though not exclusively) through their work on Christian missions, we emphasise this context. In particular, we propose that Broome's definition of paternalism could be usefully taken up by both mission historians and contemporary critics seeking to understand the backgrounds and motivations of those who invoke it.

Paternalism has been central to Broome's understanding of mission history since the publication of his 1982 book, *Aboriginal Australians: Black Response to White Dominance*. His theorisation of the concept has since evolved significantly, culminating in a 2006 article where he proposed that the operation of paternalism on Christian missions could not be understood without studying it as a site of engagement between missionary practice and Aboriginal people and cultural systems (such as kinship obligation).² This mode of analysis embedded Aboriginal agency in a concept that had previously often been understood in terms of domination and control. While his work on Christian missions has generally been influential, this particular definition of missionary paternalism has not yet received the attention it deserves.

Broome's work on Aboriginal Australia is not without its critics. Lawrence Bamblett describes reading *Aboriginal Australians* as 'a

still-developing discovery of how a non-Indigenous Australian views the colonization of Aboriginal Australians'. Bamblett has argued that scholars need to be much more cautious about generalising about past Aboriginal people's hopes, feelings or perspectives, an observation which concerns all works of scholarship and commentary on missions, including this one. However, for us as for Bamblett, the role of the critic is to move beyond affirming or rejecting past practices and scholarship we find troubling and instead to explore the ways the scholarly ideas that are their legacy influence us today.³

In this chapter we start, therefore, by exploring the origins and subsequent history of paternalism as an analytical category in the academic field of Aboriginal mission history, and an assessment of Broome's continuing and possible future influence on it. Next, we comment on the current state of *popular* debate on paternalism as it relates to Aboriginal governance in Australia, particularly focusing on Pearson's work in relation to welfare reform. In both sections we are especially interested in the ways different commentators posit the relationship between paternalism and Aboriginal agency, and the implications that this may have for their understandings of historical 'problems' and contemporary 'solutions'.

The search for Aboriginal agency has animated a great deal of scholarly work but this work has often rested upon a theory of subjectivity that reflects nineteenth-century liberal thought, imagining the free subject as both self-authoring and self-authorising, unbound by external strictures and free to exercise will independently. It is no surprise, then, that historical analyses of paternalism have tended to describe it as a system which constrained this agency by introducing commands and obligations to the otherwise self-contained individual subject, curtailing Aboriginal people's capacity to determine their own selves, their circumstances, and their histories. In his powerful critique of historical projects that seek to return agency to enslaved people, a critique to which we are indebted, Walter Johnson argues that after some 40 years of such work the injunction 'to give slaves back their agency' no longer reveals new and important historical truths. In fact, it now obscures investigations into resistance, the conditions of enslaved humanity, the processes of forming social solidarities, and into subaltern analyses of the system that exploited them.⁴

Broome and Pearson have approached this problem differently, formulating models of paternalism that do not preclude Aboriginal agency but instead re-frame it, imagining agency at both an individual and a collective level as lawful and constraining and wilful and self-determining. For Broome, Aboriginal efforts to incorporate missionaries and protectors into systems of kinship – transforming British paternalism into a syncretic system – evidence the agency of Aboriginal actors, both individual and collective. Likewise, for Pearson it was a similar system of paternalism that provided the grounds on which Aboriginal people could exercise their individual agency. Its apparent destruction in favour of self-determination had enabled rights-bearing Aboriginal subjects who lived in poverty and dysfunction; its re-instatement might instead guarantee what he terms the ‘right to take responsibility’. Paternalism emerges as both the effect, and the guarantor, of Aboriginal agency.⁵

Pearson’s writing is of particular importance both for his prominent public embrace of paternalism and because he explicitly situates his calls for paternalism today within an historical analysis of Christian missions. In his historical writing Pearson, like Broome, associates Aboriginal agency with what he sees as the success of the paternalist era; in his policy Pearson takes this association one step further to argue that paternalist structures are a crucial part of enabling future Aboriginal agency. In reading his work, many white politicians, for whom the crucial agents of history are invariably white, have recognised his celebration of the possibilities of paternalism as a call for white authority, for their exercise of paternal power over Aboriginal subjects. We suggest here that both these options are historically reductive: paternalism was not a just system in which Aboriginal people could take full responsibility for themselves, and nor do the shortcomings of the past 45 years of policy reflect Aboriginal incapacity and beseech a renewed paternalist authority. Such oversimplifications of the notion of paternalism not only elide complexity, they also obscure what is at stake in the ways various commentators define paternalism, both historically and in contemporary politics. We call here for a return to the historical argument that Broome (and indeed Pearson in his early historical work) has proposed, understanding paternalism as a system of relationality that need not annihilate the possibility of Aboriginal difference and its capacity to determine meaning.

Part I: Paternalism and Agency in Mission Historiography

Early formulations of paternalism and agency in Australian Aboriginal mission history

As the work of Richard Broome and many others have shown, Christian missionaries in Australia and beyond often conceived of their relationships to Aboriginal people in familial terms. From the early nineteenth century onwards missionaries in Australia wrote of their 'paternal' or 'parental' relationships to Aboriginal people, their fatherly or motherly love and the gratification that they felt when they considered that this was returned by 'their' Aboriginal 'children'. They invoked familial metaphors in the contexts of education, religious instruction and discipline. However, when nineteenth-century missionaries discussed their approaches to Aboriginal management they generally did not use the term 'paternalism', which was at the time most commonly used to describe relationships between workers and their employers, governments and their citizens, or imperial powers and their colonies. When in the late nineteenth century the term did begin to be used across the English-speaking world to describe the approach of missionaries, it was mostly deployed as a criticism of their work. Missionary paternalism, it was held, led to ongoing dependence on missionaries, weakened native churches, and resulted in 'much damage to the true fraternal spirit of the Gospel'.⁶ By 1901, the *Hartford Seminary Record* was calling paternalism 'the curse of modern Protestant missions'.⁷

This conceptualisation of paternalism was reflected in the work of historians writing on Australian missions in the 1960s and 1970s. In her 1969 book *The Road to Mowanjumb*, Maisie McKenzie cast paternalism as a negative force that stifled Indigenous initiative, defining it as white people 'making decisions for (Aboriginal) people and meeting their immediate material needs'. But the missionaries of Mowanjumb, near Derby in Western Australia, she claimed, were different. They practised 'an enlightened policy of non-paternalism', encouraging the Worora to 'make their own decisions, to be self-reliant, to maintain their dignity as human beings'.⁸ Charles Rowley's *The Destruction of Aboriginal Society*, published

the following year, understood ‘paternalism’ similarly, as did Michael Christie in his 1979 *Aborigines in Colonial Victoria*, who described a general ‘air of racial superiority and paternalism’ which subjugated Aboriginal people living on missions.⁹ In these works, paternalism was defined by what its critics perceived as its effects on Aboriginal people – dependence, passivity, loss of dignity – rather than their engagement *with* it. Little effort was made to define paternalism in any detail, to explain its origins or how it had become so prevalent on missions in Australia.

Broome and others develop the concept of paternalism, 1982–2006

It was in this climate that Richard Broome’s *Aboriginal Australians* was published in 1982. Seeking to comprehend the ways Aboriginal people and missionaries understood mission life, Broome devoted greater attention to the dynamics of personal relationships than most previous historians. He identified paternalism as a key element and made a first stab at explaining its origins, writing that:

Christian thought is permeated by images of fathers and sons, of shepherds and sheep, of teachers and listeners, and hierarchies. Every minister (called fathers in some churches) heads his own flock of parishioners which he cares for and guides into the Christian way of life. It was little wonder that when these Christians went among ‘their’ black ‘heathen children’ to show them the truth and the light that they ‘alone’ possessed, their sense of fatherhood, protectiveness and paternalism was dramatically increased.¹⁰

Thinking with Christian theology in this way was unusual for a historian writing Aboriginal history in the early 1980s, and was perhaps a product of Broome’s previous work on early twentieth-century Protestantism in New South Wales.¹¹ By linking missionaries’ notions of themselves as patriarchal figures to their religious backgrounds, Broome pushed previous analyses one step further to provide a glimpse into the worlds of the missionaries themselves. He was sensitive to the missionaries’ ideals but also realistic about how they functioned in practice. While writing that missionaries understood paternalism as a natural system of protective

care, he emphasised the deeply contingent ways they applied it, making life for Aboriginal people a 'lottery' in which they could end up living under a beneficent patron or a tyrant. Ultimately, however, his conclusion that paternalism 'became the blot on the humanitarianism of the missionaries' was not so different from that of his predecessors.¹²

At the same time, new developments in Australian Aboriginal history were underway, with a growing emphasis on agency, adaptation, accommodation, and synthesis.¹³ Ann McGrath was the first to use the concept of paternalism in a way that emphasised its potential for agency. In her 1987 monograph *Born in the Cattle* she built on Eugene Genovese's analysis of master-slave relationships in the U.S. to argue that paternalism on cattle stations in Australia's north had operated as a two-way system which had at least some benefits for all parties. For Aboriginal people who accepted class relations of patronage and dependence it provided 'a promise of protection for themselves and their community, allowing them to stay on their traditional lands'.¹⁴

Two years later Bain Attwood applied this approach to the history of Aboriginal missions in *The Making of the Aborigines*. Drawing on David Roberts' work on paternalism in early Victorian England, he framed missionary paternalism as a system with a broader social resonance and an established logic. Under paternalism everyone had a particular role to play and duties to perform, producing a mission world of reciprocity which 'bound missionary and Aborigine together in a most personal way'. On many missions 'the missionaries were regarded warmly by Aborigines, and their deference and loyalty to missionary rule cannot be doubted'.¹⁵

This was the first time that a post-1960s historian had suggested that Aboriginal people themselves had a stake in paternalistic relationships with missionaries. Attwood noted the unpopularity of such an idea amongst 'later generations' of Aboriginal people who denounced 'the dependency and subordination it entailed'. However, he wrote: 'One cannot ignore the fact that the paternalistic order gave dispossessed Aborigines a refuge and reinforced their sense of community; nor should one overlook the ways in which Aborigines were able to assert themselves within this order'.¹⁶ In bringing these aspects to the fore Attwood married two themes – paternalism and Aboriginal agency – which had hitherto seemed

mutually exclusive in the context of mission history, while continuing to recognise the hierarchy and structural inequalities of mission life.

This new brand of interpretation was not without its critics. While the concept of agency, according to Jan Kociumbas, ‘drew attention to the importance of individual “consciousness” in determining “being”, and of individual actions and choices in determining destiny’, an over-emphasis on agency led to a distorted view of the Aboriginal experience of colonisation.¹⁷ Patrick Wolfe, meanwhile, argued that far from providing Aboriginal people with opportunities for agency, missionary paternalism was better understood as an instance of missionaries practising elimination through a form of incorporation.¹⁸ For the historian to assume the success of that incorporation (and represent that success as at least in part the result of Aboriginal agency) was to render Aboriginal people part of a settler collective by ‘analytic fiat’; in so doing, the historian lost the ability to analyse paternalism as a strategy deployed against Aboriginal people.¹⁹

These writers to some extent foreshadowed Johnson’s later, more systematic, critique of the concept of agency in descriptions of oppressed peoples’ lives. Reviewing the use of the term in histories of the transatlantic slave trade in 2003, he argued that historians’ keenness to locate enslaved peoples’ humanity in their agency had led to the specific political and cultural contexts of their actions being overlooked. The concept of agency, he argued, was itself ‘saturated with the categories of nineteenth-century liberalism’ which assumed the universality of selfhood, even as it denied that selfhood to enslaved and oppressed peoples. By applying ‘the jargon of self-determination and choice to the historical condition of civil objectification and choicelessness’, historians had ‘shoved to the side...a consideration of human-ness lived outside the conventions of liberal agency’.²⁰ While not addressed specifically to the Australian Aboriginal context, Johnson’s arguments about agency were representative of a broader move towards complicating the concept, which was to have important implications for the writing of Aboriginal mission histories.

In 2005 Richard Broome published *Aboriginal Victorians*, in which he offered his first thoroughgoing definition of paternalism. Here, he departed from his earlier characterisation of paternalism as a Christian tendency

and instead framed it as a social force, drawing, like Attwood, on David Roberts' work. Paternalism was now cast as 'an intimate, face-to-face, two-way power relationship based on the view that all had an ordained place in the world: masters were to rule and underlings to serve, but with obligations on both sides'.²¹ Like Attwood, Broome argued that 'many Aboriginal people acquiesced in this paternal relationship in the hard post-frontier colonial world, where protection and help was needed'. But he also contended that 'such a reciprocal hierarchical relationship came naturally to people who traditionally had elders to mentor, guide and protect them through the rigours of gaining knowledge, becoming initiated, and living within a group surrounded by *mainmet* — dangerous strangers'. Paternalism, that is, could be incorporated into Koori practices of kinship as they were articulated with nineteenth-century settler colonialism or, in Johnson's terms, their specific political and cultural contexts. Indeed, Broome argued, Attwood had 'underestimated the degree with which some Aboriginal people voluntarily embraced cultural enlargement and enrichment'.²² He observed, rather, that through the ebb and flow of paternalism's reciprocal relationships, the 'reserves were not "concentration camps"...but places of refashioned community and identity: places that became "home", complete with oppressions and opportunities like any home'.²³ While this last point certainly overstated the degree of Aboriginal autonomy on nineteenth-century missions,²⁴ Broome's emphasis on Aboriginal political and cultural priorities shifted the terms of discussion. Rather than limiting his definition of agency to Aboriginal people's ability to assert themselves within settler power structures, Broome acknowledged the significance of Aboriginal as well as settler systems of meaning.

Some of these claims were further developed in a 2006 article on the Coranderrk Aboriginal Station, in which Broome showed how seeming Aboriginal 'acquiescence' to missionary paternalism could in fact be interpreted as the assertion of their own notion of 'right behaviour'.²⁵ The convergence of these values, he argued, allowed Aboriginal people to gain leverage by imposing their moral expectations on missionaries and reserve managers.²⁶ The breakdown of mutually beneficial paternalistic relationships, he argued, was 'not a result of paternalism itself, but rather the *devolution* of reciprocal agreements over generations from "proper

maintenance and protection” into a welfare dependency’. At this point, what he called ‘patron-client relationships...lost paternal closeness, became coercive, and shifted in the patron’s favour’.²⁷

From ‘the blot on the humanitarianism of the missionaries’, paternalism had for Broome become a concept with much more positive potential. He now understood it as a system that could facilitate as much cross-cultural understanding as misunderstanding, framing relationships between missionaries and Indigenous peoples as complex and ever-changing and, perhaps most importantly, allowing for intention and agency on both sides. Paternalism, for Broome, was an instance of incorporation but one that was characterised less by elimination than by mutual transformation, as peoples came together in new relationships that changed each of them, as well as potentially changing the very nature of paternalism into something closer to ‘right behaviour’. Paternalism was less a strategy directed against Aboriginal people than it was as a site of negotiation.

Defining paternalism post-Broome

Despite the fact that Broome’s work has been highly influential, his formulation of the idea of paternalism has not been fully taken up by the next generation of mission historians. Some historians have continued to draw from Rowley’s and Christie’s model, emphasising missionaries’ need for control, their moralism, and the arbitrariness of their exercise of power. Marguerita Stephens, for example, has examined the history of the Coranderrk Reserve and characterised the missionary’s interactions with Aboriginal peoples as moving from an openness to a ‘negotiated balance’ with residents to a determination to ‘impose his will on the Kulin...to ensure their conformity and subservience to the colonial order of things’.²⁸ Similarly, in his 2007 *White Christ, Black Cross*, Noel Loos described the Anglican Church’s approach towards Aboriginal people from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century as a ‘one-hundred-year-old policy of paternalistic domination’.²⁹ Despite significant differences between their analyses of mission histories, both these authors used the concept of paternalism to signify a blunt exercise of power, which they contrasted with approaches and individuals who they considered to have been more inclined towards dialogic relationships with Aboriginal people.³⁰

In a 2009 article considering space and surveillance at Ebenezer Mission, Jane Lydon moved closer towards Broome's initial definition of paternalism as a potentially benign system of power relations with a long history in Christian tradition, drawing on the work of Anne McClintock to argue that paternalism positioned missionaries as 'watchful guardians whose benign discipline was sanctioned by God in the apparently natural and nonviolent affiliation between father and children'.³¹ Yet Lydon still portrayed paternalism as a vehicle for missionary domination rather than a two-way dynamic. Jessie Mitchell's 2011 book *In Good Faith?* was one of the few to take up Broome's notion of missionary paternalism as a two-way power relationship in an academic history. Here, Mitchell presented a view of power relations on Christian missions that supported Broome's argument that 'European dynamics of paternalism could be incorporated into Indigenous understandings of asymmetrical mentoring and kinship'.³² She also sought to complicate the picture of mission power dynamics beyond the notion of paternalism, arguing that early nineteenth-century missionaries' statements about Indigenous dispossession and entitlements showed 'an interplay of ideas about paternalism, imperial obligations, and deserving poverty, as well as Indigenous people's own beliefs about entitlement, exchange and personal connections to philanthropists'.³³

In incorporating Indigenous perspectives in an attempt to elaborate the ways in which Aboriginal people were actively involved in negotiating relationships, living conditions and their status in the colonial world, Mitchell's work represents the major emerging trend in Australian mission history. (Aboriginal historians have, of course, long been interested in Aboriginal perspectives but have not usually, until recently, had the institutional backing to write and publish these histories in an academic forum.³⁴) Yet, as we have seen, few contemporary historians have explored the inner workings of paternalism in the ways described by Broome, or have even taken the time to define it in detail. The absence of an ongoing academic discussion of paternalism has implications for the public sphere, where there is often precious little agreement as to its meaning or its perceived value.

Part II: Paternalism and Contemporary Aboriginal Governance

Paternalisms past

In 2006–7, a number of public figures debated calls for a ‘new paternalism’ in Aboriginal affairs. At a time when the formal institutions of ‘self-determination’, built over the previous three decades, were being dismantled in favour of ‘mutual obligation’ and ‘intervention’, the term ‘paternalism’ evoked a sense of return to the protection era which provoked either hope or dread, depending on one’s political stance. As Elizabeth Povinelli has argued, in rejecting representations of Aboriginal incapacity and vulnerability, anticolonial and new social movements of the decolonisation or self-determination era had ‘refigured the arts of paternalistic, civilisational care into acts of colonial domination’.³⁵ Witnessing the return of the idea – held by many in the Commonwealth Government – that Aboriginal culture, rather than settler colonialism, was culpable for Aboriginal disadvantage, the heirs of these movements once again criticised such moves as recapitulating paternalism, by which they meant domination.

However, this presentation of the past as anathema was not shared by all. For some, the time before self-determination was an object of nostalgia. White reactionaries like then Minister for Health and Ageing Tony Abbott or Prime Minister John Howard considered it a time of social order where everyone knew their place and white leaders could act as guardians, or fathers, of Aboriginal communities. For Noel Pearson, that nostalgia was tinged with a recognition of the trauma of racism and discrimination, of exclusion and deprivation.

Since 1993, Pearson has risen to a position of great prominence in national politics. He has been the Aboriginal adviser of choice for several prime ministers, transforming his prescriptions for redressing Indigenous disadvantage in his Cape York stronghold into national policy. Scholarly accounts of his intellectual trajectory have often placed him in the context of third-way politics, a philosophical approach to government that emphasises the role of the state in creating incentives for subjects to take responsibility for themselves and contribute more to society.³⁶ While the growing dominance of neoliberal styles of governance are important in

accounting for Pearson's ideas and their influence, we argue that he might also usefully be situated historically: that his political philosophy arises from his reading of Aboriginal pasts. Tim Rowse has similarly suggested that Pearson's diagnosis of the Indigenous predicament, and his proposed solution, rest heavily on his historical imagination.³⁷ We suggest it is Pearson's transposition of history into a nostalgic idiom that has been both more compelling to the Australian political elite, and more effective in leading to specific policy propositions. The stories Pearson tells about the past present a morality tale that leads him to a broadly tolerant – albeit nuanced – position in relation to state paternalism.

Pearson is rarely understood as a mission historian, but his 1986 History Honours thesis, published in an edited collection in 1998, provides an illuminating glimpse into his understanding of the paternalism of the mission era. Hope Vale Mission, Pearson's home and the subject of his study, was formed at Cape Bedford in North Queensland in 1886, and became a home for many Guugu Yimidhirr people dispossessed of their land by the influx of settlers sparked by a gold rush from 1873. From 1887 to 1942 the mission was ruled by Muni, Father George Schwarz, who Pearson cast as a 'legendary' figure, a 'paternalist' whose legacy is both substantial and complex. Pearson described Muni as 'a devoted and insistent missionary who endured immense hardships and obstacles in his work, which he carried out with a determination and care for his vocation'. But at the same time, he was also 'an often callous, ethnocentric authoritarian who often failed to accord *bama* [Aboriginal people] respect as equals', who 'discriminated racially and perhaps instilled and definitely perpetuated some of the worst attitudes among the *Guugu Yimidhirr* people, attitudes that still survive today'.³⁸

Schwartz, in Pearson's telling, demanded obedience and acquiescence, seeking to regulate every aspect of Guugu Yimidhirr people's lives and to remake them in his Lutheran image. Mission residents responded to him with ambivalence, with 'love and hate, sorrow and anger, happiness and disappointment, loyalty and frustration, respect and criticism'.³⁹ The mission worked, Pearson argued, because the authoritarianism was not total; Guugu Yimidhirr were able to live overlapping public mission and private village lives, generating a Christian Guugu

Yimidhirr culture. Describing this effort, Pearson relied upon oral histories to emphasise Aboriginal action, to argue that the success of the mission 'was based on the people taking it on and making it their own'. The Guugu Yimidhirr 'were *active creators* of the mission culture that was very strong as long as it remained meaningful for them. It is a misinterpretation to view this mission as merely a history of missionary activity over Aboriginal passivity.⁴⁰ This formulation anticipated Broome's later emphasis on Aboriginal agency in fabricating relationships on the mission, proposing an interplay between 'mission' and 'village' in which an imbalance of power did not connote Aboriginal people's inability to determine their lives.⁴¹

Noel Pearson's 'Native Nostalgia'

In Pearson's writing since 1999, his account of the past has been expressed in a different idiom, that of nostalgia. Etymologically, nostalgia refers to a painful longing (algia) for a return to home (nostos), a home that Svetlana Boym argues no longer exists or has never existed. Nostalgia, then, is 'a sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with one's own fantasy'.⁴² Pearson's is a complicated nostalgia; it resembles that which the South African scholar Jacob Dlamini has described as 'native nostalgia'. Nostalgia, Dlamini suggests, is essentially a response to feeling adrift in a world that is out of control, searching the past for a time of order. For Dlamini, 'native nostalgia' is a native response to the disorderly experience of decolonisation, a yearning for the certainties of life before.⁴³ In Pearson's writing, an historical emphasis on the relatively settled accommodations of the mission in which Aboriginal residents were, at least in part, responsible for the nature of relationships, enable its articulation as the object of nostalgia. The effect of this attachment is to produce a story of the past in which social problems of the present can be traced to the breakdown of that mission order, the loss of the stable home.

In this nostalgic idiom, Aboriginal passivity and victimhood appear as consequences of the post-1967 decline of missions and their social order. The advent of Aboriginal citizenship in this era led to a range of developments that Pearson identified as apparently positive but whose 'unintended consequences' were ultimately negative. In 2007 he

suggested 'three factors as decisive contributors to the descent into hell three decades later': the introduction of equal wages and the consequent exodus of Aboriginal people from the pastoral industry, the replacement of pastoral work with access to welfare payments, and the right to drink. To these he added the availability of Legal Aid as a means of subjecting Aboriginal communities to the law, undermining the previous 'workable system of social order based on moral and cultural authority...which had provided structure to life' on missions and settlements.⁴⁴ Aboriginal decline, he thus argued, was a result of the break with paternalism, the overly celebrated rejection of the mission dispensation of social order. The 'awful truth', Pearson wrote, 'is that we threw the baby out with the bathwater'. Aboriginal people 'should have found a way to move beyond the paternalism of the past without destroying the moral and cultural order which had been such a strong quality of our community'.⁴⁵

Pearson's preference for the time before the self-determination era was emphasised in his fond memories of home on the mission. In a speech delivered in 2000, he described that home as a site of material poverty but in other respects a source of 'great wealth'. On the mission, people 'had families and a community. They had golden things and I think they often knew it'.⁴⁶ Against this he counterposed an image of Hope Vale today, which Pearson has described as a 'Hobbesian' dystopia of drinking, sexual assault and abuse, death and despair, all funded and enabled by Centrelink. Young children emerge from houses 'as if from a war zone'. There they are easy prey for the molesters their inebriated parents invite in; sometimes the only action they can take is to spend the night outside, 'scared to go back home'.⁴⁷ The paternalism of the mission may have been oppressive but it created opportunities. Its removal transformed home into a space of terror.

Seven years earlier, Pearson had discussed paternalism at Hope Vale in more negative terms. In describing a communal political awakening, he wrote:

The increasing awareness that the Queensland government's policies concerning Aboriginal people breached fundamental human rights, and that our mission friend [Schwartz] was a leading and vehement opponent of

Aboriginal rights, brought on a significant identity crisis for the community. This crisis led to a realisation that paternalism within the family might be a natural, affectionate relationship, but when it involved adults of different races it was undeniably racist, and arose from a fundamental assumption of inferiority and superiority. The government and the church had assumed our innate inferiority and their own superiority. Like many paternal relationships put asunder, the bitterness of this realisation was painful.⁴⁸

This was not, it should be clear, a rejection of paternalism itself, but rather a complaint as to its articulation. Pearson differentiated between a natural (familial) paternalism and a racist (external) paternalism, creating a legitimate space for a paternal practice that could be articulated within the home.⁴⁹ The nurturing home on the mission and the destructive home of the town today are archetypal elements of what we suggest can be productively understood as Pearson's nostalgic imagination.

In the context of Pearson's historical account, this home stands in for the way things were, the social order of the period roughly spanning from the beginning of the twentieth century until the replacement of assimilation policy with self-determination in 1972, an era McGrath has termed that of the 'state as father'.⁵⁰ Nonetheless, while his is a nostalgia for a time of paternalism it is not the paternalism of progressive critique, where missionaries were empowered to command every aspect of Indigenous people's lives. Rather, it is paternalism in the sense Broome explored, where Aboriginal people were able to adapt their traditions to a new context, creating unified communities and meaningful lives. Dismantling paternalist regulation in favour of self-determination had, Pearson argued, 'seen the decline, not of what the missionaries had achieved among the people, but rather the decline of what the people had themselves achieved in the face of dispossession and colonisation'.⁵¹ This was a paternalist system compromised by racism and authoritarianism, but it was a social order in which productive and functional Aboriginal subjectivities were possible. The self-determination era, Pearson argued, had rendered such success impossible.

Welfare reform and mutual obligation

Rowse has argued that Pearson's policy question, grounded in his historical imagination, became: 'What is to replace "paternalism" as the authority on which "community" – for a time – rested?'⁵² This question reflects, we suggest, a nostalgia that seeks to restore the remembered orderly home, an attachment that circumscribes the search for policy futures. Nostalgia stages negotiating a disorderly future not as an embrace of the uncertainty of a contingent world – as we see the Guugu Yimithirr of Hope Vale Mission do in Pearson's history – but as the work of reconstructing an idealised past. Seemingly unable to fathom a future he hasn't already experienced, Pearson has confined his policy reforms to searching for ways of replacing the paternalist figure in Aboriginal communities rather than seeking a wholesale reform of settler colonialism. He has argued for the need to 'build responsibility and reciprocity into all of the economic relationships and transactions in our society'. And he has instrumentalised welfare, already a technology of state intervention into individual and communal life, as a privileged means of achieving this, arguing for welfare reforms that incorporate relationships of paternalism between members of Aboriginal communities and the institutions of community leadership.⁵³ As he was to suggest later, the 'nub of the problem in remote communities' was that 'government funds dysfunctional behaviour'. In place of this funding, which Pearson has compellingly dubbed 'passive welfare', he has suggested transforming welfare into a conditional entitlement that is less a right than a reward for good behaviour.⁵⁴ Only by doing so, he argued, could Aboriginal people be made functional subjects.

When framed in a nostalgic idiom, Pearson's reforms were susceptible to being read as calling for a return to mission paternalism. His early articulations of these reforms had been lauded in *The Australian* in 2003 as representing a 'new politics...that is about community, devolution of power and responsibility, mutual obligation and reciprocity, and the rejection of outmoded ideological grandstandings'. But as his ideas developed they were also frequently criticised, especially by Indigenous commentators and activists, as 'paternalist' and a 'return to the policies of yesteryear'.⁵⁵ In 2004, the Howard Government announced a new approach to providing services to Indigenous communities, including the advent of 'shared

responsibility agreements'. Though initially sceptical, by 2005 Pearson had aligned himself with the Howard Government's policies of 'mutual obligation', which made Indigenous welfare payments dependent on recipients meeting conditions not required of non-Indigenous claimants.⁵⁶

Pearson defended this position by arguing that 'Indigenous support for mutual obligation has nothing to do with the paternalism of the past'. However, he attributed social ills to a failure of self-determination symbolised by inadequate or negligent parenting. Children starved, he argued, because 'their parents malnourish and neglect both themselves and their children'. Pearson further argued that

in left-liberal and progressive discourse the words 'patronising' and 'paternalistic' have become hot buttons that stifle thought. Once a policy has been branded patronising and paternalistic, debaters...feel no need to examine facts or try to understand the rationale and the intentions of the policy so branded.⁵⁷

While Indigenous sensitivity about paternalism was 'understandable', he argued that policy should be weighed on its merits rather than its similarity to previous paternalistic policies or practices.⁵⁸ Pearson had no problem with the label of paternalism. However, it is important to note, his proposals for the institution of a kind of paternalism were crucially different to those of the Howard Government. Both instrumentalised the provision of welfare as a lever to encourage good behaviour, but they differed in implementation and the relations thus produced. For Pearson, community involvement in welfare regulation was essential. For the Howard Government, by contrast, policy rested on the idea that community control was the problem: in place of a self-managing community, the state must step in and take control.

'Colonial Nostalgia'

Pearson's arguments helped create a space for the articulation of the merits of paternalism, a space into which Tony Abbott jumped when in 2006 he called for a 'new paternalism' in Indigenous policy. In a speech ostensibly about Aboriginal health, Abbott attributed poor Indigenous health statistics to a 'culture of directionlessness in which so many Aboriginal

people live'. Aboriginal self-management had failed, and, under a policy of self-determination, government had fostered this failure. A 'form of paternalism — based on competence rather than race — is really unavoidable if these places are to be well run'.⁵⁹ Notably, Abbott strongly defended the work of missionaries, who 'took solidarity with Aboriginal people to be their personal responsibility' and whose 'sense of calling...motivated them to commit their lives to Aboriginal people in ways that can seldom now be matched'.⁶⁰ Though he admitted missionary imperfection, Abbott found in their lives a sense of whiteness as virtuous service for unfortunate others. His was a nostalgia for this imagined time of self-sacrifice, of white lives lived through an ultimate devotion. It was a form of what Patricia Lorcin has described as 'colonial nostalgia', representing the lived experience of the past not as that of contestation but as ordered, mannered, and good.⁶¹

Reflecting the public sense that paternalism rather denoted a relation of domination and subordination, Mal Brough, then Minister for Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, declared he was troubled by Abbott's use of the word.⁶² Aboriginal leaders were more strident. Mick Dodson described paternalism as a 'horribly discredited approach' and called for solutions shaped around 'indigenous success' rather than the 'view that Aboriginal people are hopeless and incapable'. Similarly, former ATSIC Chairperson Lowitja O'Donoghue observed that Australia had 'tried paternalism' but 'the problem is they have not given Aboriginal people the capacity to run their own affairs'.⁶³ For Tom Calma, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, the problem with Abbott's paternalism was that 'it doesn't allow individuals to learn to develop responsibility, and it's always somebody doing something for you, and what we've seen is that's been a failure in a lot of communities'.⁶⁴ Pearson was critical too, warning of the dangers of a return to this form of paternalism: 'When it comes to government and when it comes to people of another race presuming to carry out a paternal role...I think we're returning to an old institution that became extremely problematic for Aboriginal people'.⁶⁵ Here, Pearson distinguished between state paternalism and the community-led brand of paternalism he had defended earlier, a paternalism that would make self-determination, the right to take responsibility, possible.

However, at the same time, as noted above, many Indigenous leaders were levelling similar accusations at Pearson. His welfare reforms, which created paternalistic relationships between welfare recipients and community leaders, slipped in Abbott's reading into a paternalist relation between the Aboriginal communities as a whole and the state. In 2007, Pearson's Cape York Institute recommended that four obligations must be attached to the receipt of welfare payments: a 100 per cent school attendance record for any children in the care of the recipient; no neglect or abuse of children; no drug, alcohol, gambling, or family violence offences; and those in public housing must abide by tenancy conditions. Welfare recipients would be assessed by a Family Responsibilities Commission, with local panels chaired by a retired magistrate and including two senior elders from that community.⁶⁶

When Calma suggested in a radio conversation that this was a kind of paternalism that would breach the *Racial Discrimination Act*, Pearson exploded:

Ask the terrified kid huddling in the corner, when there's a binge drinking party going on down the hall, ask them if they want a bit of paternalism...Ask them if they want a bit of intervention, because these people who continue to bleat without looking at the facts, without facing up to the terrible things that are going on in our remote communities, these people are prescribing no intervention, they are prescribing a perpetual hell for our children.⁶⁷

Paternalism, Pearson believed, could step in to replace incapable Aboriginal parents, rescuing children from their families. This was a story that resonated with conservatives across Australia.

One week prior to Pearson's castigation of Calma, the report of the Northern Territory Board of Inquiry into the Protection of Aboriginal Children from Sexual Abuse had been released. It identified widespread child abuse and located it as a reflection of lasting social problems in the north, making 97 separate recommendations for addressing these problems.⁶⁸ Inspired by Pearson's call for paternalism, a group of white men — Howard, Brough, and two senior bureaucrats — developed

a Commonwealth response, declaring an emergency and announcing a series of coercive measures that would apply to all people living in remote Northern Territory Aboriginal communities.⁶⁹ These included alcohol restrictions and a ban on pornography, welfare reforms, compulsory health checks for Aboriginal children, the acquisition of Aboriginal townships, increased policing, and many more.

There is no space here for a full discussion of the ramifications of the design and implementation in 73 remote communities, initially by military force, of what became known as the Northern Territory Intervention. What is important to note, though, is that the Intervention as a whole was designed to 'bring to an end to the recognition of, and support for, Aboriginal people living in remote communities pursuing culturally distinctive ways of life'.⁷⁰ It was intended, in other words, to mark an end to what Howard named as 'separate development' policies and what was generally understood as the self-determination era – and it did so in the name of the child. For Brough, the Intervention placed the 'vulnerable children of our nation...front and centre of the national stage'. The stakes were high: anyone who criticised the intervention, Brough declared, was 'either not a parent or doesn't have a soul'.⁷¹ Valuing self-determination, valuing Aboriginal rights in general, was cast as a discourse of sacrifice: rights could only come at the expense of children. Instead, the strong paternal power of the state was the only way to rescue Aboriginal children.

Conservative commentators celebrated this 'new paternalism' of intervention in instances of 'bad [Aboriginal] parenting',⁷² but others were more critical, casting the paternalism of the Intervention as a 'return' to a failed and anachronistic policy, one that 'reinforces dependency' and carried 'an aggressive subliminal message that lays all blame at the feet of indigenous people and legitimises the view of indigenous dependency'. Paternalism, in other words, was applied to Indigenous people, circumscribing their capacity for action to make their own world.⁷³ To this Pearson responded by arguing that the accusation of paternalism was overly simplistic and dismissive. He asserted that the 'sum total' of critics' objections to the Intervention – based, among other things, on a condemnation of a return to 'missionary paternalism' – was 'inaction and procrastination

while children's lives continue to be ruined'. It was not, he wrote, 'that the points made by the critics are wrong — they are often correct — but their criticism does not translate and often cannot be translated into action.' For him the question was always of the suffering child: 'what do you do when a child is being subjected to abuse this very day? What do you do when a child is likely to be abused next week?'⁷⁴ Though the Intervention was not precisely the program he would have designed himself, it was one he was more than happy to support.

Paternalisms today

The Howard era came to be known as one of paternalism in Indigenous Affairs.⁷⁵ This was a time in which Pearson's work had great political purchase. However, he was frequently and sharply criticised both by commentators on the Left and by Indigenous people across Australia. Aboriginal activist and Director of the Carpentaria Land Council Murandoo Yanner said of Pearson in 2012 that one could:

Pick up a newspaper from the 1950s or the 1960s, and it's word for word, white people saying the same thing as he's saying now. He's a paternalist. The reason our people take drugs, bash each other, is dispossession and the racism inherent in white society. We don't need the Great White Man to come in and manage things for us.⁷⁶

This was an accusation Pearson would not reject outright:

I've wrestled with this, and I'm unapologetic. Every successful society depends on a degree of paternalism. What I'm trying to grapple with here is, how do we solve poverty? How do you activate that fire in the belly that's necessary to lift people from their circumstances?⁷⁷

For Yanner, Aboriginal disadvantage or dysfunction was attributable to dispossession and racism, to the forces that structure Australian society. He saw Aboriginal emancipation as a goal that was only achievable through dismantling structures of oppression. Pearson, by contrast, told a story in which paternalist structures could, in fact, enable Aboriginal agency. He considered it possible to 'solve poverty' by buttressing such structures in

ways that would activate Aboriginal people as agents of their own lives, people who would take responsibility for their circumstances.

Though he shared, in his policy articulations, a liberal conception of self-authoring and self-authorising subjectivity, Pearson's notion of paternalism differed importantly from that of Abbott and his fellow travellers. While for Pearson the active agents in his stories of the paternalist era – those who crafted paternalism as a system of meaning, reciprocity, and relationality – were almost always Aboriginal, for Abbott the active agents were white men in authority. For Pearson, Aboriginal people actively created mission culture; for all its racist authoritarianism, paternalism did not prevent Aboriginal people from making their world, making history. It was, rather, the end of paternalism and the replacement of its coercions with a system of passive welfare, entitlements irrespective of the actions of the recipient, which generated disorder. A right to welfare produced Aboriginal subjects as passive victims, as people whose actions held no personal consequence, and who accordingly became dysfunctional.⁷⁸

Advocates of 'mutual obligation' policies, such as Pearson and Abbott, saw paternalism as enabling Aboriginal people's agency by creating the conditions in which they could exercise their right to take responsibility. The aim of this new, twenty-first century paternalism was a neoliberal one: to generate individuals who worked in the 'real economy'. This project was enabled by Pearson's nostalgic reading of mission-era paternalism, and by his subscription to what Johnson has called 'the conventions of liberal agency' – the belief that historical actors, and especially oppressed peoples, have the power to act freely and of their own volition. While Pearson's earlier historical work acknowledged the importance of Aboriginal actions both on the 'mission' and in the 'village', and the myriad ways in which Schwartz's paternalism limited the choices available to mission residents, his policy formulations now invested sole value in the economic and social successes of mainstream Australia and were predicated on the idea that agency, in the form of 'personal responsibility', was available untrammelled to all. This work displaced the rich complexities of his earlier accounts, eliding the decolonising possibilities of Aboriginal communal practice that he had previously imagined.

Paternalism emerged, for Pearson, as a system of obligation and opportunity, a way of producing Aboriginal people as subjects of consequence, people who could play a part in their world, who could self-determine, taking responsibility for their destiny. As he wrote in 2005 in advocating for welfare reform based on reciprocity, the 'state should play the *junior* role in the definition of reciprocity'.⁷⁹ It should be up to Aboriginal society, and its leaders, to set the terms of reciprocity'. For Abbott, the former trainee Jesuit priest, on the other hand, white authority figures (including missionaries) were not compromised figures who pursued racist policy; they were people to be celebrated. They set the just terms on which relationships were based. Aboriginal people were not necessarily agents in the stories Abbott told, in fact they barely figured. His call for a return to paternalism rested on a theory of Indigenous incapacity, an inability to self-determine. The difference between understandings of agency in paternalism was marked. It registers the distinction between Pearson's mobilisation of Indigenous community and those Marcia Langton described as 'neo-conservatives [who] steal Pearson's ideas and impose punitive measures on entire populations trapped in alcohol and substance dependency, deprive them of economic capability and subject them to a miserable, violence-ridden existence on the margins'.⁸⁰

As Raymond Williams has written of nostalgia, 'what seemed a single escalator, a perpetual recession into history, turns out, on reflection, to be a more complicated movement'.⁸¹ The paternalism to which the Howard Government sought to return expressed a desire to reinstantiate white government over black incapacity. But for Pearson the paternalist era was one in which Aboriginal people could be active agents making their world. Correspondingly, his vision of the Aboriginal agency made possible by his proposed policies was a fuller one, incorporating the arena of Indigenous culture and life embodied in the 'village' of his historical work. This resonates with the paternalism of Broome's historical analysis. The paternalism that Pearson proposed resembled that of the missions but with a twist; it would be a new home where paternalist relationships were articulated not between non-Indigenous and Indigenous people, but between responsible community elders and irresponsible community degenerates. The slippage between these two nostalgic objects, each signified by paternalism, is crucial.

Conclusion

It is perhaps unnecessary to observe that the problems facing historians attempting to describe life on nineteenth-century Aboriginal missions are in many ways different to those facing the community leader or politician attempting to formulate policy for twenty-first century Aboriginal communities. Yet Broome the historian and Pearson the community leader have for some time shared a professed desire to return 'agency' to past or present Aboriginal people. In pursuing this project Broome and Pearson share a conception of agency as not (necessarily) circumscribed by, or in conflict with, paternalism. This is an idiosyncratic view. Most public commentators counterpose paternalism and agency, describing as 'paternalist' the policy they oppose.⁸²

In exploring these ideas we aim to reckon with the legacies left by both missionary paternalism and historical scholarship. The debris of paternalism appears today in different and complicated forms, generating tensions in both Broome's and Pearson's writing. Their complex and dialogical interpretations of paternalism suggest the radical potential of an account which portrays missionary paternalism as cross-cultural rather than assimilating, in which there remains space for Aboriginal meaning and relations to flourish. And, in productive ways, they leave unresolved the question of the relationship between Aboriginal incorporation into the larger settler polity and independence from it. They also provide a warning that subtle historical analysis can be instrumentalised by public figures committed to rehabilitating pernicious tendencies of the past, illustrating the underlying settler colonial continuity of which paternalism is a symptom. Nonetheless, as is so productively foregrounded in Broome's account, such policies are subject to the corresponding and continuing force of Aboriginal action, action that bends the world.

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