

Mixed-race unions and Indigenous demography in the Hunter Valley of New South Wales, 1788-1850

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Charles Rowley recognised that, by the 1970s, descendants of part-Aborigines had the most rapid rate of natural increase in the Australian population.¹ He recognised there was ‘so little known of the demography of this section of the population’ that it was important to conduct an investigation into the question of part-Aboriginal population growth.² Earlier, the 1909 New South Wales Protection Act had encompassed both so-called ‘full-blooded’ and ‘half-caste’ Aborigines. This Act was amended in 1915 to include any ‘admixture of Aboriginal blood’, highlighting miscegenation that began in the early colonial years.

The children of mixed ancestry have identified themselves as Aborigines, or have been so recognised by the settler communities in which they have lived or worked. The term ‘miscegenation’ is controversial given its legal usage to pathologise sexual relations between ‘whites’ and ‘blacks’ in the race war of 19th-century America. In Australia, it was used by historians dealing with sexual relations from the late 18th century. Reports from the interior by the 1830s emphasised that many convict stockmen had an Aboriginal ‘wife’. Successive governors attempted to prevent these relationships, seen as a cause of frontier conflict.

During the period considered in this article, so-called interbreeding was considered ‘socially demeaning’ in white society, but was viewed by some commentators as improving the racial stock of both convicts and Aborigines.³ Some historians have embarked on an analysis using the term ‘miscegenation’. To them, miscegenation is the mixing of people of different race, especially of whites and blacks leading to ‘miscegenated’ children.

Miscegenation and the notion of ultimate absorption

The 1937 Commonwealth and State Conference held in Canberra concluded ‘that the destiny of the natives of aboriginal origin, but not of the full blood lies in their ultimate absorption by the people of the Commonwealth’. The assimilation era

was thus officially ushered in, although the idea had been around for many years. The conference assumed that a high rate of intermarriage was responsible for an escalating decline in the number of full-descent Aboriginal people.

The idea of absorption of black into white became the subject of serious critical scrutiny – the politics of miscegenation were changing. Intense feelings of ‘unease, guilt, alienation, illegitimacy, self-hatred and angst’⁴ became pivotal, according to Mitchell Rolls. The 2001 Census showed that the descendants of mixed marriage between black and white tend to identify as Aboriginal (69 per cent of couples with an Aboriginal partner; in capital cities this rises to 87 per cent). The descendants of mixed marriages are an important source of the rapid growth ‘in the self-identified Aboriginal population in Australia’. But Rolls also notes that ‘Indigenous full-blood women’s fertility is now at or below replacement level’.⁵

A newspaper report of the findings of researchers Genevieve Heard, Bob Birrell and Siew-Ean Khoo claims that Indigenous ‘exogamy’ or intermarriage has increased since 2001 and was well above that of most migrant groups. In capital cities, they found a majority of Indigenous people had paired with non-Indigenous people – 82 per cent of men and 83 per cent of women in Sydney. Outside urban areas, there were lower intermarriage rates: 64 per cent in New South Wales. They concluded that Australia’s history of racial division was not inhibiting intermarriage and any remaining divide was due to socio-economic differences and geography.⁶

As argued by a number of historians, the cultural divides in the 19th century did not inhibit the process of ‘exogamy’ and assisted the rapid decline of the full-blooded Aboriginal population.⁷ Mixed-race unions occurred from the earliest days of European intrusion into the lower Hunter Valley.

Donaldson argues that, while contact history has been concerned with reassessing the extent and intent of mutual violence and killing on the colonial frontiers, the ‘other extreme has been treated more coyly’ as there is no self-declared historian of sexual contact between Aborigines and Europeans. Nevertheless, she found a growing interest in the sexual aspects of conquest and colonisation in the works of Lyndall Ryan, Ann McGrath and Raymond Evans.⁸ Donaldson defines ‘miscegenation’ as the birth of new individuals descended from locals and invaders. Such a process, she claims, ‘not only increases the population but produces people who are a potential challenge to the very terms, and terminology, of the colonial encounter’. The authors of this article find this explanation of miscegenation a good working definition.

Internationally, Stoler’s book, *Carnal knowledge and imperial power: race and the intimate in colonial rule*, is descriptive of its contents.⁹ Her study is a colonial reading of Michel Foucault’s notions of ‘Bourgeois Bodies and Racial Selves’ and explores imperial power and carnal knowledge intersecting with gender and morality in the creation of mixed-race peoples.

Like Stoler, the frontier explored in this article is a racial frontier – the Hunter Valley of the early colonial period. It was a masculine-dominated society of imperialist invaders, who were sexually lonely. They easily succumbed to the availability of vulnerable Aboriginal women under their thrall. The attitudes of men in such isolated frontier contexts could be heavily racist.

The Hunter Valley region and traditional Aboriginal peoples

The aim here is to trace the significance of extant incidents of mixed-race unions from the early colony. An examination will be made of mixed-race sexual unions as a factor in the rapid depopulation and detribalisation of traditional Aboriginal society in the Hunter Valley until about 1850. Other factors were massacre and extermination, which have been discussed more frequently over recent years.¹⁰ Mixed-race unions and their impact on demography have received less attention.

The Hunter Valley region is a suitable geographic location to explore the effect of mixed-race marriages and sexual liaisons on the original Indigenous populations. This region saw significant European intrusions in the early colonial period characterised by a disproportionately high ratio of male colonists with relatively few European women accompanying them. European occupation was ‘to change for all time the traditional life of its Indigenous people’.¹¹

N. B. Tindale’s map showing the results of his 1938-1940 survey of the ‘Aboriginal Tribes of Australia’ located the Worimi peoples on the coast of the Hunter Valley from the northern bank of the Hunter to the Manning River and to near Tuncurry along the coast; inland to about Glendon Brook and the head of Myall Creek and including the whole of Port Stephens; and the Awabakal people from the south bank of the Hunter River near the present city of Newcastle to include the whole of Lake Macquarie (ref: Threlkeld 1892, Howitt 1904). To the west of these two peoples in the Hunter Valley, Tindale located the extensive territory of the Geawegal above Glendon, Muswellbrook, Scone and the lower part of the Goulburn River (ref: Rusden 1880, Howitt 1904), and to the north west the Kamilaroi, including a vast area both within the Hunter Valley and beyond to Queensland¹² (ref: Ridley 1886, Fraser 1892, Matthews 1898, Howitt 1904, McPherson 1905, Brown 1918).¹³

The sources Tindale drew from included Threlkeld, Howitt, Enright, Radcliffe-Brown, Firth, Matthews, Rusden, Ridley, Fraser, McPherson and Brown.¹⁴ By 1940, Tindale had drawn from a comprehensive array of social and physical anthropologists and linguists. Nevertheless, there is no completely accurate way to define tribal boundaries. There was also significant inter-tribal ritual and ceremony across boundaries.

The Hunter Valley peoples – mainly the Worimi, Awabakal, Geawegal and Kamilaroi – all had a large number of clans made up of around 100 to 150 people

and sometimes more. Given the natural wealth of the valley and its river systems, their population had to be large and healthy in 1788, but the exact number is unknown, due to a lack of records.

The Hunter region is a major river system that flows into the sea at Newcastle, some 170km north of Sydney. It extends westward and inland for 195km with an average width of 120km, covering an area of 23,400 sq km. The valley occupied by the Hunter and its tributaries, the Goulburn River, Wollombi Brook, Falbrook and the Williams and Paterson rivers, includes the most extensive tracts of alluvial plains of any coastal river system of New South Wales and was highly prized by early rural settlers, who had at their disposal a supply of male convict labour without female companionship.

These owner-settlers were to form themselves into the squattocracy and become known as upper-class graziers – prominent families that set up dynasties after successes on the fertile lands of the Indigenous peoples. Convict labour was used with stockmen or shepherds living outside the main homestead settlement in outstations which were frequently isolated, heightening the sexual exploitation of local Aboriginal women.

The valley is a well-drained topographic unit between the north and central coastal areas of New South Wales. The Hunter River rises in the heavily forested highlands of Mount Royal Range that forms part of the northern rim of the valley basin. The Goulburn River rises in the west of the valley and Wollombi Brook in the south, whereas the Williams and Paterson rivers draw from the north side of the valley. The environs of Port Stephens are geographically part of the Hunter Valley region.

Intrusions, colonisation and the destruction of tribal life

Apart from the initial boat explorations of the Hunter River through its sea estuary, the most significant land exploration was conducted by John Howe, a police constable at Windsor. He gained permission from Governor Macquarie to lead an expedition northward from Windsor. News of Oxley's 1818 discovery of the Liverpool Plains, the Peel River and extensive grasslands had excited small farmers confined to the Hawkesbury River flats. A pathway was needed north of Windsor and into the Hunter Valley to continue on to the Liverpool Plains.

Howe's expedition left Windsor on 24 October 1818 accompanied by three farmers, four convict assistants and an Aboriginal guide. Two days later, they set out from a farm on the Colo River over rocky outcrops and rugged terrain using pack horses and reached the banks of the Hunter River 13 days later. When they returned to Windsor on 14 November, Howe provided a report giving precise distances and directions. He recounted how his party had 'fell in with a natives camp [clan]' of about 60 people of which some had never seen a white man and many more had

never seen a horse. The younger Aborigines ran away and others ‘got up trees [for fear of the strange animal]’. Howe distributed biscuits to calm them down.¹⁵

This event mirrors Clendinnen’s notion of ‘mutual goodwill and gift giving’ that occurred in initial encounters.¹⁶ This first encounter was harmonious. But this was not to be the case when graziers and farmers arrived in the valley in larger numbers up until the early 1840s when an agricultural depression struck the colony and slowed expansion.

Returning to Howe’s expedition, by 3 November, both horses and men were jaded after a long day’s difficult journey. The following Friday, Howe recorded that he was viewing in the Hunter Valley ‘the finest sheep land’ since he had ‘left England’. On the way back, the party met an elderly Aborigine who suggested a better track to Windsor.¹⁷ Outward from Windsor, that same track took a more north-easterly route than Howe’s first expedition, descending to the Hunter plain near Broke instead of Bulga. This became the main route into the Hunter Valley taken by settlers, apart from those who came by ship into the Hunter River.

Soon after Howe’s expedition, Macquarie, accompanied by Major Morisset, the first commandant of the secondary prison at Newcastle, explored the lower Hunter on horseback after arriving by ship.¹⁸ A few years later, farmers and graziers were to arrive in the valley, when it was opened up for free settlement in 1822, by ship from Sydney or by bridle track from Windsor. Land granted by 1825 – mainly blocks greater than 100 acres – covered almost entirely the southern and northern banks of the Hunter River.¹⁹

Newcastle was occupied as a jail for the more difficult convicts from Sydney on 30 March 1804. It remained primarily a place of punitive servitude until 1822 when the bulk of the convicts were transferred north to Port Macquarie. The Hunter region then became a laboratory for European settlement in Australia made up of vast pastoral estates. A million acres was transferred to the London-based Australian Agricultural Company in 1824, which encompassed the present Port Stephens, Stroud, Dungog and Gloucester districts.²⁰

An influx of males with few females continued to have a profound impact on the demographic profile of traditional Aboriginal society. As revealed in a New South Wales Select Committee Inquiry in 1846, miscegenation was widespread throughout the Hunter. Children of mixed descent were frequently observed at Lake Macquarie, Port Stephens and into the Hunter Valley.²¹

The European invasion displacing many river clans of the Worimi, Awabakal, Geawegal and Kamilaroi was destructive of traditional cultures. The landscape was in no way a ‘*tabula rasa*’, as if there was ‘nothing there, no histories, no human meaning’.²² The invasion was predicated on the dispossession of the Indigenous peoples.

The major rural activities of the colonists that invaded the vast lands and waterways, especially from the mid-1820s, were at first in the Upper Hunter and

Goulburn Valley regions. Natural grasslands were rapidly consumed by grazing sheep, cattle and horses. Fodder crop cultivation further destroyed the natural environment and in the highlands timber-getting soon became an industry. Along the river flats of the lower Hunter and its tributaries, the growing of vegetables, orchards, vineyards, pig-raising and later dairying with associated crop growing created an influx of male colonists in an overwhelming land grab. The colonial population after 1824 soon overcame the rough-and-ready count (which can now never be known for sure) of the Indigenous population of the valley.²³

Recognition of mixed-race ancestry

So when did mixed-race ancestry begin with Australia's original inhabitants? There are several more remote theories where sexual liaisons may have occurred: from the Dutch exploration of the northern coastline in 1606 to the southern waters of Van Diemen's Land in 1642; English exploration in 1688 along the Western Australian coast; and the voyage of the *Endeavour* by James Cook in 1770 on the east coast. To the north, contact between Aborigines and the Macassans probably occurred well before any Europeans sighted Australian shores. There is the even fainter possibility of Chinese and Portuguese influences. Such questions remain largely unanswered as there is a paucity of documentary evidence.²⁴

From the outset, leading colonial officials had to grapple with the imbalance between the sexes among the convicts, who were the largest group of arrivals. A few months after the arrival of the First Fleet, Governor Phillip wrote to the Colonial Secretary, Lord Sydney, in 1788, about his concerns regarding the gender imbalance in the population. With around 800 males without partners, such a demography presented moral issues for the governor as his predominantly male population in some instances turned toward unlawful homosexual acts considered deviant. The relatively small female population experienced what was felt to be moral disintegration. Acts of sodomy, considered a capital offence under British law, alarmed colonial officials. In an attempt to alleviate the gender imbalance, Governor Phillip considered resorting to obtaining women from South Pacific islands. He quickly revised his viewpoint and decided against it on humane grounds, that bringing them would cause them 'to pine away in misery'.²⁵

While part of the original scheme for the colony was that convict men and women would form unions and produce families, men in authority had regarded convict women as commodities in short supply. When the *Hunter* arrived in 1798 with 94 convict women and a herd of cattle on board, ironically most of the officers in power took their pick, leaving only a few convict men lucky enough to obtain wives. On the frontiers, convict women were even scarcer. Men in power viewed convict women as needing protection, hence they tended to be confined to Sydney.²⁶ Convict men stationed on the outskirts in outdoor labour turned their attention to Aboriginal women for sexual gratification.

During the early colonial period, 1788 to about 1830, Aborigines experienced anguish and confusion at the sight of the new-born with fair skin and blue eyes. Sources indicate some reported cases of infanticide; however, it is difficult to estimate the exact number. Probably the incidence of infanticide occurred before Aboriginal people became accustomed to the physiological variations in the new-born. The alarm expressed by Aboriginal parents at the sight of a new-born infant with unknown traits is portrayed by David Collins.²⁷ He noticed that:

A Native woman had a child by one of our people ... she perceived a difference in its colour ... she endeavoured to supply by art what she found deficient in nature, and actually held the poor babe, repeatedly over the smoke of her fire, and rubbed its little body with ashes and dirt, to restore it to the hue with which her other children had been born.²⁸

Once it was realised that the infant was healthy and not deformed as was first feared, infanticide dramatically declined. This process was corroborated in Lake Macquarie by Aboriginal informant Biraban, whose comments suggest that infanticide did occur occasionally, but had a minor effect on depopulation.

Biraban's words were recorded by the Reverend Charles Pleydell Wilton, the chaplain appointed in 1831 to Newcastle, the third and last of its military chaplains who conducted services at Christ Church, in the convict jail and in the general hospital.²⁹ He wrote that 'M'Gill' (Biraban) told him that it was unusual to destroy the half-caste male infants and that there were only two cases he remembered when infants had been killed. One was strangled, the other was thrown into the sea and beaten with a waddy until dead. When Wilton questioned him, Biraban replied: 'They used to do it, but no kill infants now.'³⁰

The Aboriginal people suffered confusion. They had maintained a strict genetic design through prescribed kinship marriages for thousands of years. Joseph Cooper, the Church of England rector in the districts of Falbrook and Jerry's Plains, viewed infanticide as a cultural practice among Aborigines on particular occasions. Cooper wrote on 30 March 1846:

Infanticide has been known amongst them, but not generally; cases have been observed in which they have evidently, for some unknown cause, slain their children when but young; in one instance ... the means employed for destroying the infant (a half-caste) were most singular, favouring the idea that they were in observance of an appointed ceremonial, and one which they dared not shun.³¹

Infanticide was a temporary consequence of miscegenation in the early contact period, but judging by sightings of the growing number of children of mixed descent throughout the Hunter region, the practice was minimal. The Reverend Robert Ross, a Congregational minister from Scotland involved in the German Mission to Aborigines and pastor of the Pitt Street Congregational Church,³² wrote:

I have never known an instance of infanticide; I have heard of its having been practised among them formerly; they seem to be very much attached to their children.³³

Again such thoughts reiterate the belief that infanticide was a minor factor in full-blooded depopulation and far less significant than is portrayed in poorly-researched histories.

One of the earliest recorded examples of miscegenation occurred in Port Stephens in 1790. Five convict men escaped in a poorly-equipped boat from Sydney and capsized the vessel at Port Stephens. According to David Collins, the convicts 'spoke in high terms of the pacific disposition and gentle manners of the natives' who allowed them 'wives ... and one or two of them had children'.³⁴ Aboriginal people gave such convict fugitives not only asylum, but access to a sexual union.³⁵

In August 1796, Aboriginal people at Port Stephens were again helping colonists who encountered difficulties from the sea. Collins wrote:

The [white] people of a fishing-boat, which had been cast on shore in some bad weather near Port Stephens, met with some of these people, who without much entreaty, or any hope of reward, readily put them on a path from thence to Broken Bay, and conducted them the greatest part of the way.³⁶

Aborigines were responding to the intrusion of their lands and waterways by helping colonists in trouble and yet resisting aggression in the same period. Between 1788 and about 1804, the first colonial men to visit the Hunter Valley were treated well by Aborigines. These strangers were few in number and seemed to have no intention of staying. Such strangers were occasionally incorporated into the Indigenous system of mutual respect.

A few years later, the reception of escaped convicts was not nearly so friendly and reflected a changed atmosphere. In July 1804, James Field, an escaped convict, crawled into Newcastle where he gave himself up. He was naked, wounded and beaten and had not eaten for days. He presented a 'truly miserable and wretched spectacle' when Menzies, the commandant of the jail, put him on display in front of a parade of prisoners in what was meant to be an object lesson about the results of trying to escape.

Earlier, Field and two other convicts known as Broadbent and Johnson had escaped from Sydney in an open boat with provisions. After spending three days in Port Stephens, they continued north. Their boat was soon wrecked in a gale, but the three men got to shore unharmed. They could not repair their boat and fate turned against them once more. Broadbent was mortally wounded by a spear and died instantly. At the same time, Johnson received six spears in different parts of his body and died of his wounds five days later.³⁷

William Cox, a military officer, roadmaker and builder who took government contracts for erecting jails and schools in the Windsor district,³⁸ claimed at a public meeting in 1824 that the best use which could be made of 'black fellows' was 'to manure the ground with their carcasses'. This statement was recounted by the Reverend Lancelot Threlkeld in his reminiscences and papers. He elaborated on Cox's statement in a letter found in his papers: 'A Gentleman (Mr Cox) of a large property [in the Bathurst district] recommended at a public meeting in this Colony that the best measure towards the Blacks would be to "shoot them all and manure the ground with them"'.³⁹

Threlkeld's opposition to such brutal measures was like a voice crying out in the wilderness. Many colonists placed no value on the lives of Aborigines. At least these attitudes are commented upon by William Breton in Port Macquarie when he wrote:

It is to be hoped that the practice of shooting them is at an end, but they are still subjected to annoyance from the stock-keepers, who take their women and do them various injuries besides.⁴⁰

The Lake Macquarie Mission and the Australian Agricultural Company

While Aboriginal men were arrested, imprisoned, executed and shot, their women fell prey to European men. The Reverend Lancelot Threlkeld of the Lake Macquarie Aboriginal Mission and Robert Dawson, the first Australian Agricultural Company superintendent, both wrote of carnal knowledge between Aboriginal women and European men resulting in many children born of mixed descent. When Threlkeld first arrived in Newcastle in 1825 to set up his mission,⁴¹ he angrily reported that 'stockmen' were 'annoying the Blacks by taking their little girls' and that the 'overseer' of a convict gang was abusing young girls.⁴²

Australian Agricultural Company management claimed that venereal diseases were prevalent among employees. It was believed these were contracted through intercourse with Aboriginal women. The company's medical officer reported:

From the 23rd January last to the 30th of April, 68 of the convict servants have contracted a disease by intercourse with native women, which deprived the Company of their Services while they were under medical treatment for longer or shorter periods.⁴³

The company made efforts to alleviate this problem by banning their employees from fraternising with Aboriginal women, but they were ineffectual. On 8 May 1828, an order was promulgated that aimed to prevent male employees from visiting 'Black Camps' in pursuit of sexual encounters – severe punishments for disobedience were outlined: 'The Free People by Fine and Imprisonment, the Prisoners [transported convicts] by Corporal punishment and reduction of the usual

Indulgences.’ Native constables were appointed and stationed at black camps to arrest any person visiting. Principal officers of the company were on the alert to prevent sexual intercourse between the servants and Aboriginal women. The intention was to prevent further growth of the mixed-race population on the company estate.⁴⁴

Between about 1817 and 1828, larger numbers of colonists invaded the Hunter region, some from the Hawkesbury district. They arrived with sheep and cattle intending to settle and so usurp Aboriginal hunting grounds. Violence broke out and changed the fabric of race relations. Aboriginal women continued to be sexual prey for white men.

In November 1828, one of the few population census figures that include Aboriginal people reported there were about 760 Aboriginal men, women and children in local communities in the lower Hunter Valley. This figure included communities in the Newcastle and Lake Macquarie districts, each with an average of 152 people. These communities were gender balanced with a healthy number of children. For example, a community at Newcastle had 50 men, 50 women and 50 male and female children, while at Lake Macquarie another community had similar figures.

In the Supreme Court, Threlkeld spoke passionately of the abuse of Aboriginal women in the Hunter:

I know frequent instances of their gins being taken from them by whites; in two instances I had to interfere, and to appear at the Police Office; I have had repeated complaints from the blacks of their women being taken away from them for improper purposes ...⁴⁵

Such crimes were frequent in the early colony. With numbers of free settlers arriving concomitant with the release of male prisoners on ticket-of-leave and those whose sentences had expired, greater numbers of sexual assaults on and unions with Aboriginal women in the Hunter occurred. Some liaisons were of mutual attraction or negotiations. Occasionally, long-term relations were formed. Nevertheless, Threlkeld reported in December 1837 about the ‘*un-matrimonial state*’ of thousands of male transported convicts across the countryside ‘amidst females, though of another color [sic], leads them by force, fraud, or bribery to withdraw the Aboriginal women from their own proper mates’.⁴⁶

The pastor was in fervent moral panic. To him, the very fabric of colonial society was stained by sex outside marriage between colonists and Aboriginal women and frequently accompanied by violence. When Aboriginal men were released from imprisonment, they often returned to their traditional lands to discover their wives had become concubines of Europeans. This led to domestic violence and occasionally death. Aboriginal women became victimised targets of their frustrated male counterparts.⁴⁷

Dawson observed children who were the product of sexual liaisons between Aboriginal women and European men and stated that this was common throughout 'every district':

I have heard it asserted that the natives always destroy their half caste or mulatto children. Such things may have happened, but I have seen mulatto children of both sexes in the same state as their black friends ... They are also seen in every district ... and notwithstanding the general fidelity of the natives to each other, the husband is extremely proud of a white child as he calls it.⁴⁸

A significant number of the next generation were the product of mixed-race unions. From 1790 onwards, children were born to Aboriginal women and convicts who escaped from Sydney and were living at Port Stephens. This factor played a role in explaining tribal depopulation in the Hunter.

Consequences

Well before the commencement of the protection era in 1883 establishing the New South Wales Aborigines Protection Board and creating the 'Stolen Generation', Aboriginal children were being absorbed into colonial society. During Governor Macquarie's regime, attempts were made to indoctrinate Aboriginal children into Eurocentric ways. A Black Native Institution was established in 1815 in Sydney for this purpose. A similar view was held by the Reverend Wilton in Newcastle, who stated:

Children from three to six years of age should, if possible, be obtained from their parents, and admitted into the school. No coercive measures, however, should be exercised; but the motives which lead to their being taken away, and the sincerity of those who undertake their instruction, should be carefully explained to their parents or friends. These children, placed under the charge of a master and mistress of well-known morality of conduct and zeal, tempered with discretion, should be watched with the greatest strictness – be taught to speak and read the English language – be duly instructed in the nature of any guilt committed, and punished according to its magnitude; and as they grew up to years of maturity, the advantages of domestic comfort should be constantly set before them.⁴⁹

Colonial commentators like Wilton appeared sympathetic when compared to the approach of the New South Wales Aborigines Protection Board, but the fate of these children is unclear, as noted by Gillian Cowlishaw:

While there is mention of half-caste children from the earliest times, some presumably fathered by the overlanders, or having come from the earlier invaded areas, there is virtually no discussion of their origin or their fate.⁵⁰

By the early 1800s, especially from 1828, war-like conflict existed in the Hunter River, which led to heavy depletions of Aboriginal men. Its origins are heralded in

the *Sydney Gazette* in mid-1804 when the exploitation of timber in the Hunter was on the rise:

While the *George* was procuring their [timber] at the Hunter's River ... [the ship's crew] experienced a smart attack from the natives ... They assembled in a formidable body and manifested an inclination to hostility probably in the hope of plunder; but being suspected, they were treated with caution and reserved civility, even after provocation. One of the savages, at length, seized hold of a musket, and endeavoured to wrest it from its owner, but failed in the attempt after a long struggle. This served as a signal for a general assault; and a number of spears were instantly thrown, though fortunately none took place. One of the assailants fell in the conflict, after which all the others disappeared but unexpectedly and prodigiously increased in number and threatening ... they rushed forward in a mass, obliged the [crew] to take precipitately to their boat, and continued to annoy them until beyond their reach.⁵¹

The carnage of war had depleted traditional society around Port Stephens and Dawson believed its western shores had become a new frontier of colonial anarchy. Violence was rapidly reducing numbers of traditional Aborigines in Port Stephens during the late 1820s. Evidence is found in their refugee status:

The natives complained to me frequently, that 'white pellow' [white fellows] shot their relations and friends and showed me many orphans, whose parents had fallen by the hands of the white men ... They pointed out one white man, on his coming to beg provisions for his party up the river Karuah, who, [they] said, had killed ten, and the wretch did not deny it, but said he would kill them whenever he could ...⁵²

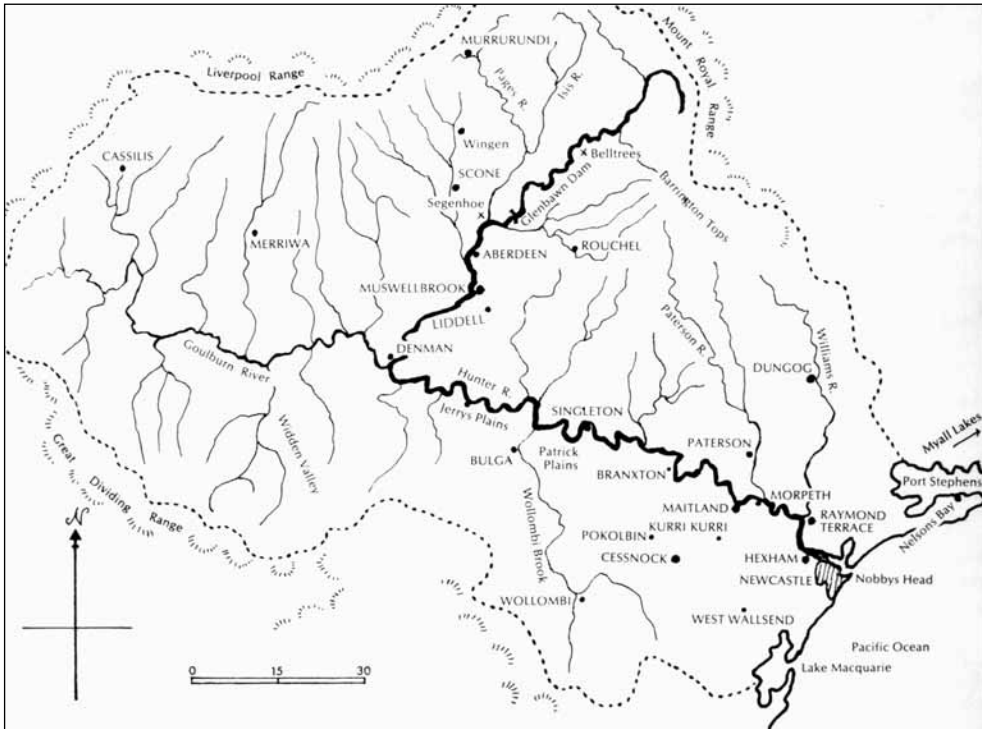
So children of mixed descent were placed in a precarious position in the Hunter region during this tumultuous war period. Many traditional parents were killed leaving survivors with the responsibility of raising orphans.

Another early colonist, William Telfer, reinforced Dawson's view that violence was part-and-parcel of the miscegenation process. He pointed out that in the early days there was a scarcity of white women causing the workers on cattle and sheep stations to take on black females as common-law wives, thus accounting for the many half-caste children found in such places. He notes that even a great many owner-squatters had black companions. If tribal men complained of the women being taken, they were shot down by raiding parties.⁵³

Many mixed-race children grew up in domestic servitude or as farm labourers. An anonymous memorandum to Judge Burton in 1838 shows that male Aboriginal children were also removed from their people:

There is one native in Maitland (taken when quite an infant) who is now, at the age of 18 years ... He has been brought up as white children are, and knows nothing of the habits of his countrymen.⁵⁴

By 1840 in the aftermath of closer colonial settlement in the Hunter region, traditional Aboriginal men had been disempowered and many had been killed. Aboriginal tribes had been dispossessed. Mixed-race unions between Aboriginal women and colonial men had become commonplace.



The Hunter River Valley.

In the 1840s, children of mixed descent were noticed throughout the Hunter. At places like Newcastle, Hexham, Maitland, Jerry's Plains, Falbrook, Paterson and Wollombi, there are several records of the existence of mixed-descent children. There were a disproportionately low number of Aboriginal women compared to men still living in the black camps in such locations. The women had been frequently removed to be live-in domestic servants by unmarried settlers who then used them for their own pleasure. Rape was common. Some had left the camp due to mutual attraction with a white man who offered them a better life. The reasons for their departure from these camps were complex. Some liaisons became long-lasting unions into which children were born. Some women left camps to enable them to supply their people in the camp with rations.

The disparity in the judicial system was frequently demonstrated. White murderers of blacks boasted about their deeds, even to Dawson, who was the local magistrate. He claimed he was unable to take legal steps against isolated cedar

cutters who murdered Aborigines because of the lack of witnesses. Eye-witnesses were reluctant to come forward. The judicial system in the Hunter, as elsewhere in the Colony, refused the testimony of Aborigines.

Aboriginal communities were under threat from a violent, lawless frontier enemy. The private contract and convict cedar gangs frequently existed in acrimonious relationships with Aborigines. Dawson wrote:

Several boys and women were shown to me whose fathers and husbands had been shot by the marauders for the most trifling cause: one for instance, for losing a kangaroo dog, which had been lent to him for the purpose of supplying the whites with game.⁵⁵

Communities were thrown into disarray by these violent men; children were deprived of parents placing strain on the surviving families. Dawson wrote:

They are remarkably fond of their children, and when all the parents die, the children are adopted by the unmarried men and women, and taken the greatest care of.⁵⁶

Mixed-race communities beyond 1840

Between 1840 and 1909, arising from different kinds of mixed-race sexual unions, new mixed family groups were well established throughout the Hunter Valley. In time, they became a significant part of Hunter Valley society in the later colonial and early 20th-century periods on reserves, missions and stations. Unfortunately, the power of the New South Wales Protection and Welfare Boards also saw, between 1883 and about 1970, the removal of children from their families, thus fragmenting them. By 2009, however, the survival of mixed ancestry families in the Hunter Valley shows decisively that such families are an important component of rural Australia today.

Of the liaisons between Aboriginal women and colonial men in the Hunter Valley, none surpasses the romanticised exploits of Frederick Ward, alias Captain Thunderbolt, and Mary Ann Bugg, alias 'Black Mary' or 'Yellilong'⁵⁷. The Bugg mixed-race family dynasty is a dynamic case of miscegenation in Aboriginal-European contacts. Hundreds of descendents are still found throughout the Hunter Valley region. It demonstrates a strong tradition of successful long-term unions of people of mixed descent who mainly identify as Aboriginal.

James Bugg, a transported convict, was the origin of the large mixed-descent Bugg family. As a herdsman with the Australian Agricultural Company north of Stroud, he formed a long-term sexual companionship with a Kamilaroi woman named Charlotte Derby. They had several children. The eldest was Mary Ann.

At age 14, Mary Ann was married to an older white man, an ex-police constable.

He took Mary Ann to a small property near Mudgee where they had one child. After his death, Mary Ann formed a liaison with Frederick Ward, who became famous as the bushranger Captain Thunderbolt. At the time, Ward was on a ticket-of-leave from prison and working at his sister's farm. Following another brush with the law, he found himself incarcerated once more on Cockatoo Island to serve out a second sentence.

Legend has it that Mary Ann helped him escape by swimming from Balmain to Cockatoo Island camouflaged with seaweed and, hidden in the waters underneath the work wharf, supplied him with a file. She had horses ready at Balmain's Long Nose Point and after he escaped by swimming ashore, they rode off together to become a successful bushranging team, Captain Thunderbolt and his Lady. She died of pneumonia in 1867 near Muswellbrook at the age of 33. Ward was shot down near Uralla in May 1870. Their children were placed in orphanages and grew up in Sydney.

Mary Ann was born in Gloucester in the Hunter Valley in May 1834. As a child, she was taken from her parents and placed in the Female Orphan School, Parramatta. She later returned to her parents, James and Charlotte. She had five siblings: John, William, James, Jane and Elizabeth.

Together through the male line they formed the large mixed-race Bugg dynasty, now in their hundreds today. The Bugg girls married into other mixed families.⁵⁸ The Bugg saga is a Hunter Valley story of multiple mixed-race unions over a long period. Hundreds of people named Bugg live in the various towns of the Hunter. At family reunions they endorse the family stories, myths and legends that provide them with a unique identity.

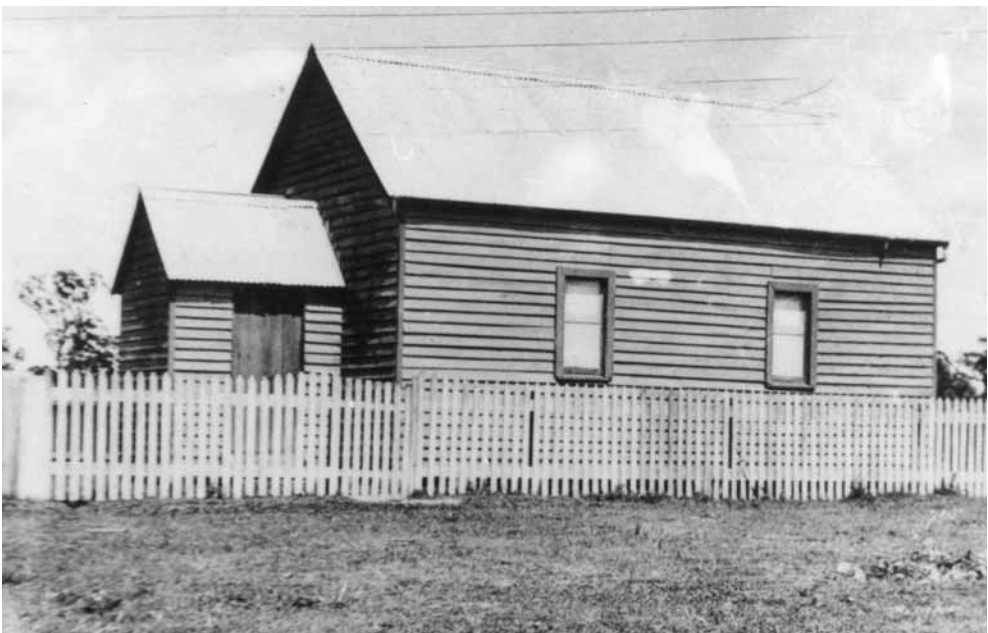
The Ridgeway family dynasty – a case study

The mixed-race ancestry of the Ridgeway family of the Hunter region is another relevant major success story of survival through miscegenation over several generations – one of many that could be cited. Les (Leslie Arthur Frederick) Ridgeway at 81 is a distinguished Worimi elder who is related to the mixed-race Russell family, also of the Hunter region. Les's paternal grandparents were John Henry Ridgeway, a bush carpenter and chair-maker born in 1872, and Elizabeth Russell, born in 1878.

They were married by the Inland Aborigines Mission on 1 July 1909 at the Karuah Aboriginal Mission and Reserve at Port Stephens in the northern coastal section of the Hunter. They had seven children who grew up and formed mixed-race unions. One was Les's father, Arthur John Ridgeway, a fisherman and industrial worker, born in Forster in 1904, who married Amy Marjorie Maher, born in 1908 at Salt Ash, Port Stephens of mixed-race parents. Most of Les's brothers and sisters married and had children.



John Henry Ridgeway, bush carpenter, Worimi elder and member of the Ridgeway family dynasty, late 1920s at Karuah Reserve. (Source: Les Ridgeway's private collection.)



The Karuah Aborigines Mission Church, built by Aboriginal labour, where many weddings took place in the early 20th century. (Source: Les Ridgeway's private collection.)

Before she married, Amy Marjorie, Les's mother, was a domestic servant to a Newcastle family and was brutally raped by her master. Her own father, Henry Waddingham, born in 1868, was a wealthy ship-builder and timber merchant at Windi Woppa, Port Stephens. He never recognised his daughter. Amy Marjorie's Aboriginal mother and Les's grandmother, Laura Maher, born in 1889, was a domestic servant and housekeeper in the Waddingham household for several years. She had three children to Waddingham, of whom two survived to adulthood. When Waddingham refused to recognise the children, Laura registered them under her surname of Maher. She later married Ernest McKinnon, an Aboriginal man of mixed descent related to the Bugg family.

Les Ridgeway married a local white woman, Betty Ann Parkinson, in the Apostolic Church in Cessnock and they had a son and two daughters – all highly qualified teachers, all married. Les has many grand- and great-grandchildren. He had a distinguished career in the New South Wales and Commonwealth public service as a welfare officer to Indigenous communities, particularly in New South Wales.

His paternal great grandfather was an Englishman, George Ridgeway, born in 1828 in Buckinghamshire. After migrating to the Hunter Valley, he married Sarah Reid, an Aboriginal woman from Walcha in the Upper Hunter. They had five children, one of whom was William 'King Billy' Ridgeway, born at Cape Hawke. He became a leader of the saltwater clans of the Worimi people.

Apart from the Russell family, Les Ridgeway has extended family relationships with the Ping, Manton, Maher, Simon and Clarke families of the Hunter and Manning regions. Today, there are several hundred people of the Hunter region who are descendants of the original mixed-race union between George Ridgeway and Sarah Reid.⁵⁹

The current Ridgeway families have a long continuity in the lower Hunter and demonstrate a diversity of experience as social workers, artists, singers, leaders, authors and family historians. The younger generation has gone on to university studies in education, law, history and fine arts. The former senator Aden Ridgeway, who was born north of the Hunter, is a notable well-known figure in what is now a vast mixed-union family.

Despite shifting government policies since 1828, in the vast Hunter Valley region mixed-race ancestry has become of growing importance in the demography of its psychological and social landscape.

Twentieth century demographic outcomes

In 1988, Gillian Cowlshaw exclaimed: 'Then and now miscegenation is a subject of great secrecy, even more than violence,'⁶⁰ but it is clear that, with growing numbers locating their Aboriginal ancestry, the cloak of secrecy is falling off. What Cowlshaw was arguing is applicable to the colonial period when clandestine sexual

relations passed without notoriety. Occasional reference is made to the improprieties of male colonists, but it was not until the frequent sightings of children of mixed descent that records refer to liaisons between the invaders and locals.

While it is unknown when the first instance of miscegenation occurred, there is no doubt that, by the end of the 19th century, this factor had indelibly marked demography. Rapid depopulation of traditional Aborigines, especially in south-eastern Australia, had taken place. Even in earlier historical accounts, there are admissions to the impact of violence and massacres on the rapid depopulation of Aboriginal people. The authors of the *Australian Encyclopaedia* in 1925 wrote:

In the early days the number of aboriginals diminished through quarrels with the settlers – the whites violating some Aboriginal law, the blacks retaliating, or vice versa. For something [that] from a white man's point of view was a crime, *a whole tribe would, in official language be 'dispersed' [massacred] and similar methods were employed unofficially.* The aborigine had little protection and no redress; it would have been better for him if he had been an uncompromising fighter, declining to have anything to do with his spoilers.⁶¹

Strong words! But then the same authors raised the question of miscegenation and its consequences.

Despite remaining an unclear statistic of social history in the Hunter, miscegenation is a far more appealing suspect in the rapid tribal depopulation than anything else, except massacre and extermination. According to several primary sources, there were frequent incidences of sexual relationships between settlers and Aboriginal women that produced children. As is the nature of these relationships, sexual abuse was experienced by Aboriginal women from male colonists.

One of the great mistakes of administrators in London, who were responsible for organising the First Fleet expedition, was a failure to ensure a gender-balanced population. It is conceded, however, that the concept of a penal colony was punitive and that satisfying the sexual needs of convicts was not a priority. Notwithstanding the penal nature of the colony, it is apparent that the decision to send so many men into an Indigenous community was problematic.

If the purpose was to have Aboriginal men killed and their women taken, it is inconceivable how brutal, insensitive and inhumane such thinking, which claimed civility and Christianity, was. It was an act of gross human negligence. The establishment of an English colony was a permanent invasion of Aboriginal lands and waterways. The decision to send some 800 un-partnered males into an environment with a significant Indigenous female population was a recipe for disaster. The sight of naked young Aboriginal women around the shores of Port Jackson provided an overwhelming temptation to sex-starved convicts and their guards leading to direct confrontation with Aboriginal men.

The same applied to the Hunter Valley region. Even in the 20th century the recorded population figures in New South Wales still reflect the calibration of miscegenation, sexual relations and rapid depopulation of Indigenous people by violence and warfare in the early colonial period:

New South Wales: Numbers of Australian Aborigines

Census 1921

Full Blood: 1597

Half-caste: 4588

Total: 6185

Census 1944

Full Blood: 594

Half-caste: 10, 022

Total: 10, 616

Census 1947

Full Blood: 953

Half-caste: 10, 607

Total: 11, 560⁶²

While the rough estimate of the Indigenous population in 1788 was 300,000, in the 1954 census the estimate of full-blood Aboriginal people in the whole of Australia was 26,363. This seemed to include only those who lived in close proximity to European occupation. Any uncounted numbers could not possibly have reached 300,000.⁶³

A snapshot of what had happened can be gleaned from the example of a small reserve that still existed in the Hunter Valley in 1958 – Karuah Aboriginal Reserve at Sawyer's Point, where the Karuah River flows into Port Stephens. The Aborigines Welfare Board inspector estimated that there were 57 Aboriginal residents on the reserve, most of whom he described as 'lesser caste'. There were no 'full-blood' people (that is, people of full kinship local genetic descent). There were only two described as half-castes – a man and a woman. There were 28 children of 'lesser caste' under 18.⁶⁴

It was an example in miniature of the fecundity of mixed-race relationships. Another generation would arise, and then another, and so on. White men from Karuah township constantly sought sexual liaisons with the 17 or so Aboriginal girls under 18 years of age, despite strong resistance from the Aboriginal men. This situation was replicated on other Aboriginal settlements in New South Wales until at least 1967.

Another indicator of the impact of miscegenation is found in the profile of Aboriginal people placed on missions in the Hunter region, such as Saint Clair near

Singleton, where Indigenous author James Miller listed over 180 family names:

‘This probably shows the extent of miscegenation in the early contact period.’⁶⁵

Miscegenation has had a profound effect on traditional Aboriginal kinship patterns and populations. The existence of a predominantly male colonial society had, from 1788 to 1840, led to conflict with Aboriginal men over Aboriginal women. As a long-term result, mixed-race populations in the Hunter Valley became prominent on reserves by the turn of the 20th century. They recognised themselves, however, as Aboriginal with a sense of belonging closely to one another, rather than to the world outside.

While it is difficult to estimate the extent of miscegenation in New South Wales, it would be fair to state that it was a major influence in the regeneration of a modern Aboriginal population with distinctive cultural and societal values and a pride in their heritage as a distinct people.

When Prime Minister Harold Holt created the Commonwealth Council of Aboriginal Affairs, the forerunner to the Department of Aboriginal Affairs, the three government bureaucrats, W. E. H. Stanner, Barrie Dexter and H. C. ‘Nugget’ Coombs, came up with what is probably the only viable formula for legally establishing Aboriginal identity – by descent, individual decision, and community acceptance. This was an implicit recognition of mixed-race people, the products of widespread miscegenation that had continued from early colony times.⁶⁶

Stanner identified the oddness of the Australian ‘yearning for an unblemished history in which no crimes were committed and no innocent blood shed’.⁶⁷ The history of mixed-race unions tells the opposite story of the truth ‘about injuries that were done and crimes that were committed’.⁶⁸

What began to happen in the Hunter in the protection era from the early 1880s was the construction of what Robert McKeich called a part-Aboriginal world which contained its own social structure.⁶⁹ Such a defensive structure included childhood, adolescent and parental roles, roles related to economic, religious, education, sport, judiciary and similar institutions of the wider society filtered in a particular way from an Aboriginal perspective through local knowledge and past history.

A good example is found in the sporting career of ‘Big Billy’ Ridgeway, a renowned local sportsman at Karuah. At first he played in district clubs in cricket and rugby league; later he played exclusively in Aboriginal teams.⁷⁰ A well-integrated social system has gradually developed to meet the needs of part-Aboriginal or miscegenetic communities.

The socio-centre for this was and is frequently in the vicinity of the former station, reserve or mission of the protection period where cultural centres and Aboriginal lands councils have since been set up. Such is the case at Karuah around the site of the former Australian Inland Mission. In Newcastle several families migrated in the 1930s and the 1940s from a variety of New South Wales country

towns seeking employment and social improvement in the industrial city usually spoken of in Aboriginal communities as 'The Big Smoke'.

Platt's Estate in the suburb of Waratah in western Newcastle was a shanty town from the 1930s where the unemployed settled during the Great Depression. It eventually became a place where several Aboriginal families from the countryside of the Hunter region came to live in the 1940s and 1950s. They built their own huts there as they could find no accommodation elsewhere.⁷¹ The men obtained work at Broken Hill Propriety steelworks and other heavy industries. Later Aboriginal families found better accommodation (some in Housing Commission homes) in various Newcastle suburbs.

The professional boxing stadium attracted other Aboriginal families to Newcastle including the famous Sands (Ritchie) brothers who were Australian and Empire boxing champions.⁷²

In the Hunter Valley the Aboriginal communities that are the direct result of miscegenation in earlier generations, their social interaction is usually a part of an integrated system of knowledge which can be the source of a meaningful behaviour. The social reality of everyday life is a continuum where family relations are of central importance. One feature of these families both in the countryside and the industrial settings of the Hunter Valley is the relatively large number of children in each household that guarantees a particular form of socialisation in the next generation.

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