

## RESEARCH NOTE

# When Wages Were Clothes: Dressing Down Aboriginal Workers in Australia's Northern Territory

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**SUMMARY:** Prior to the introduction of equal wages for Aboriginal Australians in 1968, it was not unusual for Aboriginal workers in the Northern Territory to be paid in kind: in basic food, clothing, and tobacco. Some workers received a few shillings a week, but even this wage could be withheld completely or placed in a trust fund. In keeping with a supposedly humanitarian protectionist ethos, clothing was encouraged as a substitute for cash wages. But in practice employers rarely equated clothing with wages. Within the exploitative colonial context of Northern Territory few employers believed that any form of payment was owed to Aboriginal workers. This paper explores the perspectives of pastoralists, employers of domestic servants, and the army, considering how clothing primarily catered for the employers' needs. Aboriginal workers and indeed most government officials had the expectation that Aboriginal people would be given clothes as a form of remuneration but in practice this was rarely the case.

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### INTRODUCTION

An Australian campaigner for Aboriginal rights, Mary Bennet, spoke in 1943 to the Anti-Slavery and Aborigines' Protection Society, attacking the system of indenture for Aboriginal workers that operated in Western Australia, Northern Territory, and Queensland. Bennet protested that workers were being clothed and fed but denied wages, referring to this as a "fodder and harness" method of payment.<sup>1</sup> This criticism is central to most historical studies of Aboriginal labour, particularly those relating to the northern cattle industry which employed large numbers of Aboriginal

1. Alison Holland, "Feminism, Colonialism and Aboriginal Workers: An Anti-Slavery Crusade", in A. McGrath & K. Saunders with Jackie Huggins (eds), *Aboriginal Workers*, special issue of *Labour History*, 69, (November 1995), p. 60.

workers.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, there is an underlying assumption that clothes were officially recognized as a form of payment. A close examination of the rhetoric and practice of employers in the Northern Territory, however, suggests that they rarely regarded clothes as a substitute for wages. Clothes were provided either to satisfy the employers' cultural notions of an appropriate dress code for their employees, or to ensure that workers had practical clothing to facilitate work. Furthermore, employers were reluctant to allow workers to take clothes away from their place of work. Insofar as employers sought to retain ownership or control over clothing, it cannot be said that this clothing was "paid" to Aboriginal workers.

### WHY CLOTHES INSTEAD OF CASH?

When the Commonwealth Government took over the administration of the Northern Territory in 1911, steps were taken to regulate the employment of Aboriginal workers. The Aboriginals Ordinance 1911 outlined a system in which the Chief Protector of Aboriginals would have control over Aboriginal employment by means of licences sold to employers.<sup>3</sup> The majority of Aboriginal workers in the Northern Territory worked for pastoralists as stockworkers or in private households as domestic servants. In the 1930s and 1940s the army became another significant employer of Aboriginal labour. All three groups adhered to the Aboriginal wage scale outlined in the 1928 Bleakley Report. This report, written by the Queensland Chief Protector of Aboriginals, was hailed as the first thorough investigation of Aboriginal employment conditions in the Northern Territory. In a system which discouraged the payment of cash wages, Bleakley focused on employment conditions such as accommodation, food and clothing. He confirmed the basic remuneration for Aboriginal workers as a wage of 5 shillings per week, 2 of which were banked in a Trust Account, and a supply of food and clothing. He argued that where the "supply of food and clothing is fairly fulfilled, the wage of 5s per week may be regarded as reasonable remuneration".<sup>4</sup>

The practice of paying wages in kind rather than in cash was not particular to employers of Aboriginal labour. The truck system, which operated in early colonial Western Australia, paid workers in goods which were supplied by the company store. This system was implemented at a

2. Tim Rowse, *White Flour, White Power: From Rations to Citizenship in Central Australia* (Cambridge, 1998); Mary Anne Jebb, *Blood, Sweat and Welfare: A History of White Bosses and Aboriginal Pastoral Workers* (Crawley, WA, 2002); Dawn May, *Aboriginal Labour and the Cattle Industry: Queensland from White Settlement to the Present* (Cambridge, 1994).

3. *Aboriginals Ordinance 1911*, No. 16 of 1911, *Commonwealth of Australia Gazette*, 2, Melbourne, 8 January 1912.

4. Commonwealth of Australia, Parliamentary Papers, vol. 11, 1929, Report by J.W. Bleakley, "The Aboriginals and Half-Castes of Central Australia and North Australia", pp. 7, 1159–1225.

time when the colony lacked the infrastructure, circulating money, and markets, which made it difficult to spend cash wages. It was abolished in 1899 but remote areas such as cattle stations were able to apply for exemption.<sup>5</sup> The in-kind payment of Aboriginal workers in the twentieth century could be seen to be a carry-over from colonial practice, but for the fact that the overall remuneration for Aboriginal workers was well below white standards. In addition, the argument that remote areas made cash wages impracticable could not be applied to Aboriginal domestic servants and army employees who were employed in the town of Darwin.

From the point of view of the employers, the Aboriginal wage system was intended to provide cheap labour, but the official justification for the lack of cash wages was that this was for the good of the employees. Pastoralists were careful to couch their objections to cash wages in the humanitarian language of the time. They argued that wages would have a detrimental and demoralizing effect on Aboriginal workers. In 1932, the Northern Territory Pastoral Lessees' Association stated that: "A large proportion of the money given to aboriginals in the present stage of their development is apt to be spent on liquor and opium. Thus the money the pastoralists can ill-afford is used to degrade the remnants of the aboriginal race."<sup>6</sup> They argued that the "aboriginal race" was incapable of resisting the corrupting influence of European culture, claiming that extinction was inevitable if Aboriginal people were not protected.<sup>7</sup> Missionaries employing Aboriginal workers expressed similar opinions. The Reverend Jarvis, attending a conference in Darwin in 1930 stated that the "moral and social welfare of the native is of greater importance than the question of paying them money. [...] the native, practically speaking, is a child".<sup>8</sup> This notion was in keeping with the paternalist "protection" policy endorsed by the Australian government.

At the 1929 Welfare Conference on Aboriginal labour, pastoralist, H.E. Thonemann, an absentee landlord from Melbourne, similarly argued:

We pastoralists say that the black should be properly clothed and fed, and given tobacco and luxuries, such as in certain cases he deserves. [...] The average black does not know the value of coin, and to give him coin is going to lower his status and not raise it.<sup>9</sup>

5. Simon Stevens, "A Social Tyranny: The Truck System in Colonial Western Australia, 1829-99", *Labour History*, 80 (May 2001), pp. 83, 96.

6. Cited by Carrodus on 27 April 1932, National Archives of Australia, (hereafter NAA), A1 1933/269.

7. Durack, a pastoralist and retired parliamentarian, also argued that wages would demoralize Aboriginal people. See 1930 Darwin Conference notes, Telegram, MP Durack to Grant, 21 April 1930, A1/1 38/329, NAA; see also MP's Diary, 1916 cited in M. Durack, *Sons in the Saddle* (London, 1983), p. 325.

8. 1930 Darwin Conference notes, NAA ACT, A1/1 38/329.

9. Welfare Conference, 11 September 1930, pp.20-21; Noel Butlin Archives Centre [hereafter

Within the context of this protectionist system, Thonemann's definition of "properly clothed and fed" was known to be more generous than the larger companies, which scarcely paid lip service to the ethos of protectionism. According to the North Australia Workers' Union (NAWU) organizer, Owen Rowe, the food and conditions on the eastern cattle stations of the Northern Territory, including Thonemann's, were "as high above Vestseys as the stars are above the earth".<sup>10</sup> Vestseys, the British-owned Australian Investment Agency, was one of the three main companies in the western region, the other two being the Durack family and the British-owned Bovril Australian Estates.

Owen Rowe painted a dire picture of conditions faced by Aboriginal pastoral workers in 1930s Northern Territory. He wrote:

These aboriginals have proved themselves worth the same wage as the white, and common British justice, if it existed in the Northern Territory, would see that they got it. At present they are slaves without the advantage of slavery. They are not paid for their work. In losing their hunting grounds they lost their means of subsistence and no means of sustenance has been provided in their place. The working aboriginals are not given enough food and clothes for the maintenance of their dependents. A slave owner would not allow his slaves to be decimated by preventable disease and starvation the same as these people are in the country or bush.<sup>11</sup>

Rowe makes the important point that working conditions need to be viewed in the context of loss of land and means of subsistence in the face of colonial dispossession. Historian Tim Rowse raised a similar point in relation to Ann McGrath's 1987 book, *Born in the Cattle*. While he acknowledged that McGrath provided a much-needed ethnographic approach that allowed for Aboriginal agency in negotiating their relationships with pastoralists, he cautioned that it was "necessary to reassert [...] that pastoral occupation was and is a form of colonialism".<sup>12</sup> On the question of wages, Rowse argued for the need to consider an Aboriginal perspective in which the value of cash wages might be less significant than liberal-managerial scholars such as Frank Stevens had suggested.<sup>13</sup> At the same time he questioned whether an Aboriginal perspective, in which "low pay and working conditions might not be as abhorrent", might be seen as legitimating the exploitative practices of pastoralists. These are important considerations for this exploration of the issue of clothing.

NBAC], ANU, Bovril Deposit, 119/4/1.

10. *Northern Standard*, 17 October 1930.

11. Owen Rowe, "Aboriginal Employment and Conditions in the Northern Territory", p. 5, 16 March 1932. Report to C. Crofts, ACTU, NBAC, ANU, ACTU Papers, N21/48, ACTU WA and Darwin, 1929–1940.

12. Tim Rowse, "Paternalism's Changing Reputation", *Mankind*, 18:2 (August 1988), pp. 57–73, 57.

13. Frank Stevens, *Aborigines in the Northern Territory Cattle Industry* (Canberra, 1974).

## “PROPERLY” CLOTHED?

NAWU Secretary, Robert Toupein, was highly critical of working conditions for Aboriginal workers on pastoral stations. He wrote in the *Pan-Pacific Worker* in 1930:

On these great cattle stations, owned chiefly by absentee capitalists, the aborigines are worked by them as stockmen, drovers and general rouseabouts. They are paid no monetary wages, and are given the roughest and poorest of food, principally damper and beef [...] and they are given the scantiest of clothing and a small amount of stick tobacco of the worst kind [...].<sup>14</sup>

Owen Rowe similarly reported that clothing supplied to Aboriginal workers was the absolute minimum:

The clothes supplied to blacks working under country licences are only sufficient to cover their nakedness, and in most instances is supplied from this viewpoint only. The boys on the cattle stations are given a pair of dungaree trousers and a shirt. The lubras are given a dress of the cheapest material, calico and a piece of nagra, nagra is the native name for turkey red twill, it is worn as a loin cloth with the dress over it, just sufficient to cover the nakedness. The empty flour bags are given to the lubras to make dresses [...].<sup>15</sup>

A Matt Thomas wrote to the Darwin newspaper, the *Northern Standard* in 1937 explaining the difficulty of obtaining clothes for Aboriginal workers while working for Vestey's out of their Wave Hill cattle station. Thomas was employed as a “white ganger” in charge of Aboriginal workers repairing the road out of Wave Hill. He had three Aboriginal men and seven women in his team. He wrote:

The native boys and lubras were constantly asking me to get them blankets, trousers, shirts, boots and dresses from the station stores [...]. I managed to get sent out eight pairs of trousers, three shirts, and three pairs of boots for the boys. Nothing was sent out for the lubras, and they worked harder and longer hours than the bucks. The lubras had to make dresses from flour bags to cover their naked bodies.<sup>16</sup>

Conditions in the township of Darwin were somewhat better, but still far from adequate. In 1911, there were 125 Aboriginal workers employed in Darwin, according to the report of J.T. Beckett, Inspector of Aboriginals. Their work included gardening, chopping wood, shopping, and housework such as sweeping, washing, and hanging out clothes. Beckett described the Aboriginal workers as “a docile, submissive people, who, in spite the many

14. R. Toupein, “Exploitation of Aboriginals in Northern Australia”, in *Pan-Pacific Worker*, 1 September 1929, p. 12; NBAC, ANU, AWU Deposit, P52/12.

15. Rowe, “Aboriginal Employment and Conditions in the Northern Territory”, p. 3.

16. Matt Thomas, letter to the Editor, “Exploitation of Native Labour”, *Northern Standard*, 20 August 1937.

aspersions cast upon them by detractors in other States render excellent service in return for the pittance doled out to them".<sup>17</sup>

The clothing issued to domestic servants varied widely from household to household. C. Price Conigrave, who was Inspector of Fisheries in Darwin from 1923–1927, commented on the practice of providing “hand-me-downs”:

If during the week you have given your black boy your discarded sun helmet, or an old pair of shoes, trousers, singlets or some other garment, irrespective of whether they are several sizes too large for him, it is a foregone conclusion that he will appear in them at the picture show and “swank” over other boys who have not been quite so generously treated by their employers.<sup>18</sup>

The practice of giving Aboriginal servants over-sized, cast-off clothes was not unusual. In an interview, Con Scott, who was born in Darwin in 1921, recalled their Aboriginal servant was given his father’s hand-me-down trousers which he pulled in at the waist with a piece of rope.<sup>19</sup>

In some cases employers did buy new clothes for Aboriginal servants, but as one employer recalls, they always bought these clothes from the Chinese store which specialized in cheap clothing specifically for this purpose.<sup>20</sup> Rowe described the quality of clothing as being of the poorest material. Even so, he concluded that: “Generally speaking, the blacks around the towns are well fed, clothed, and treated as compared with their brethren in the bush.”<sup>21</sup>

#### CLOTHING TO SUIT THE EMPLOYER

There is ample evidence to suggest that where Aboriginal workers were given clothes it was merely to satisfy the needs of the employers. In the case of pastoralists, it is clear that they could not employ an Aboriginal stockworker without providing adequate protective clothing suitable for riding, such as boots and trousers. According to a study of cattle stations undertaken by the Berndts, the nature of stock work was such that any clothes wore out. The Berndts noted that “an issue of trousers, shirt, and boots every two months was the minimum necessary for these Aborigines, who work put a heavy strain on their clothing”.<sup>22</sup> Clothes in this context

17. T. Beckett to Dr H. Basedow, Chief Protector and Chief Medical Inspector. 29 July 1911; NAA, A1/1 1912/10964.

18. C. Price Conigrave, *North Australia* (London, 1936), pp. 120–121.

19. Transcript of interview with Thomas O’Connor (Con) Scott by Margaret Kowald, (1990), Northern Territory Archives Service [hereafter NTAS], Darwin NTRS 226, TS616, tape 1, p. 14.

20. Transcript of interview with Bernadette Wing, (1990), NTAS, NTRS226, TS611, tape 1, p. 13.

21. Rowe, “Aboriginal Employment and Conditions in the Northern Territory”, p. 2.

22. Ronald M. Berndt & Catherine H. Berndt, *End of an Era, Aboriginal Labour in the Northern Territory* (Canberra, 1987), p. 69.



Figure 1. Aboriginal servants wearing hand-me-down clothes and admiring themselves in photographs, Darwin.

*E.D. Donnison, "Darwin, 1914–1920", MSS/890/3, Mitchel Library, State Library of NSW. Used with permission.*

were not so much remuneration as a part of the necessary equipment to undertake work. Keith Willey's biography of Matt Savage, manager of Montejinnie Station, an outstation of Victoria River Downs, from 1924 to 1934, describes the process of giving out clothes as part of the necessary preparation for starting work:



[...] the black stockmen would be coming in from their annual walkabout, when they wandered over the country living in the manner of their ancestors. Back at the station we would throw each man a pair of boots, a shirt and trousers; and set them to shoe the horses and check ropes and hobbles.<sup>23</sup>

In the case of private employers of domestic servants, clothes served three main purposes. Clothes were initially given to cover nakedness and protect the European sense of modesty. An adequate supply of clothes and also laundry facilities were also necessary to ensure that servants presented themselves for work in state of cleanliness. Finally, some clothing, particularly items such as white aprons, were intended to transform Aboriginal workers into the employer's ideal notion of the domestic servant. Creating this image was essential for those employers who regarded servants as a means to ensure their social status.

The discourse of cleanliness or "the fetish of domestic purity"<sup>24</sup> was paramount for white women in Northern Territory households, both in the town and in the country. Hazel Mackey, whose husband was head of the Bureau of Meteorology from 1937, recalled in an interview that their Aboriginal servant had been a stockman "out in the bush somewhere". Typically, her first concern on meeting him was to solve the problem of dirt. She recalled:

But when he turned up – my goodness me was he a disreputable looking fellow – matted hair and dirty clothes. Oh dear! I looked at him and I said: "What's your name?" And he said: "Willie Dyal". So I said to him: "You're plenty dirty fellow." and he said: "No more missus, no more." And I said: "You're plenty dirty fellow." So, I got him a bucket of water and a face washer, and I asked him if he would take himself down to the house and wash himself all over. [...] So anyhow he went and washed himself all over. He looked better, but his clothes were still filthy, so I got my husband to buy him some new clothes.<sup>25</sup>

In this context the purchase of clothes was serving her purpose, her need for cleanliness and not his. There was no sense that clothing was part of his remuneration for work.

But even in circumstances where Aboriginal people wanted to have clean clothes this luxury was only available to those who directly served the employers. In their survey of cattle stations, the Berndts noted that Aboriginal women struggled to keep their clothes clean with only small supplies of muddy water for washing. The exception was the women who were employed in the dining room. They were required to keep their frocks particularly clean and the clothes "they wore while waiting on the

23. Keith Willey, *Boss Drover* (Adelaide, 1971), p. 71.

24. Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (London [etc.], 1995), p. 214.

25. Transcript of interview with Hazel Mackey by Criena Fitzgerald, (1990), NTAS, NTRS 226, TS 625, tape 2, p. 5.



table were washed or boiled and sometimes ironed in the station laundry".<sup>26</sup> Inara Walden in her study of New South Wales domestic workers suggests that where employers supplied "full servant's attire" it was "a matter of their own status".<sup>27</sup>

The novelist, Xavier Herbert, who lived in Darwin in the late 1920s, was scathing in his criticism of those white administrative staff in Darwin who liked to imagine themselves as British colonial masters. His novel *Capricornia* follows the lives of the Shillingsworth brothers who came to Darwin to work as clerical staff. On the subject of servants he wrote:

Oscar took a smelly native from the Compound and converted him into a piece of bright furniture [...] and called him the Punkah Wallah. This Wallah fellow also waited at table and did odd jobs; and his lubra worked as housemaid. The services of this pair cost the Shillingsworths five shillings a week in cash and scraps of food, and added inestimably to the value they now set upon themselves.<sup>28</sup>

In depicting the employers' representation of the servant as a "piece of bright furniture" Herbert amply demonstrates why Aboriginal labour retained overtones of slavery well into the twentieth century. As long as workers were viewed as possessions, any clothing was simply a means to enhance the value of the employer's possession.

Writing in 1914 whilst staying at the house of the Administrator of the Northern Territory, Elsie Masson describes the relationship between the employer and employee. In a fictional account based on her observation of Darwin life, she relates the story of an employer, here called the "Missis" and an Aboriginal servant:

George suddenly seems to be becoming more brisk and diligent in his work. For a few days he is so good that the Missis decides he is really worth keeping, and, if worth keeping, deserving of more respectable clothing. So she buys him a pair of dungarees, a leather belt, two khaki shirts, and a red handkerchief. "I give you these because you good boy", she explains graciously. "Orright, Missis", he answers tersely. Next morning he presents himself in all his new grandeur and says, without any preliminaries, "Missis, me go out bush to-morra." "What, George?", exclaims a startled Missis. "Go back longa my country to-morra", he repeats. "How you go?" asks the Missis weakly. "Canoe". There is nothing more to be said.<sup>29</sup>

In this account, the new clothes were bought with the express intention of transforming George into a more "respectable" servant. It was clearly

26. Berndt & Berndt, *End of an Era*, p. 79.

27. Inara Walden, "That Was Slavery Days': Aboriginal Domestic Servants in New South Wales in the Twentieth Century", in McGrath & Saunders with Huggins, *Aboriginal Workers*, p. 198.

28. Xavier Herbert, *Capricornia*, (Sydney, 1937), p. 9.

29. Elsie Masson, *An Untamed Territory*, (London, 1915), pp. 46–47.

inconceivable that he should take these new clothes as his reward for services and leave.

#### PAID IN KIND – CLOTHES TO KEEP?

If clothes were given to workers in lieu of wages by way of reward for labour, then the clothes should have become the possession of the worker. By possession, I mean that the clothes should have been theirs to keep, to sell, to trade, or to give to family or to others to satisfy customary exchange. But despite official policy, clothes were rarely given as wages, and it was common for clothes to remain the property of the employer.

On cattle stations, Aboriginal stockworkers were given clothes suitable for riding and working, but these clothes were on loan rather than clothes to keep. In 1932 Owen Rowe, commented that:

One big station firm indulged in the Christian practice of compelling the stockboys, after the mustering of the cattle was finished, which is just a seasonal work, to hand back the clothes, issued them to work in, and then sending them naked into the bush to fend for themselves [...] The scarcity of clothing among these unfortunates compels them to wear the clothes until they are absolutely filthy or until they fall to pieces on them.<sup>30</sup>

The Aboriginals Ordinance, 1918–1943 stated that employers were to “keep each aboriginal employed by him in food and clothing” but it was not clear that the clothing was to be kept.<sup>31</sup> Nevertheless, according to the 1928 Bleakley Report, the practice of having workers return their clothes to the store was not part of the contract. Bleakley argued that as “these clothes are part of the working native’s remuneration it seems like a breach of contract to make him return them as they are actually his own property”.<sup>32</sup> Despite this, the practice continued on most stations. During the 1947 conference on Aboriginal employment Mr Brodie, representing the Northern Territory Pastoral Lessees’ Association, noted that no clothes were supplied to Aboriginal stockworkers during the off season when they were on “walkabout”.<sup>33</sup> Rather, clothes were returned to the employer for safe keeping until the new season began.

In rare cases employers did give out special clothes as a form of bonus for good work, as in the case of Matt Savage. Savage, who married an Aboriginal woman, was apparently not concerned that the clothes in question would be given away. : “You might give a blackfellow an extra-bright cowboy shirt and one of his mates would want it. At first the reply would be: ‘Oh, I’m not used to it yet. Can’t give-um yet.’ But in a few days the shirt would change

30. Rowe, “Aboriginal Employment and Conditions in the Northern Territory”.

31. Cited in Berndt & Berndt, *End of an Era*, p. 13.

32. Bleakley Report.

33. Brodie, p. 13, NBAC, ANU, Bovril deposit, VRD papers, 42/14.

hands.”<sup>34</sup> This particular shirt, which clearly had exchange value for the worker, can be more properly viewed as a substitute for cash wages.

In Darwin, the practice of giving clothes away to family was common in the early days. In 1911 the Inspector of Aborigines, J.T. Beckett wrote:

Owing to the strange, but in many ways estimable system of socialism existing among them, employers often have great difficulty in keeping their black boys clothed at all and frequently a boy who has been given a new shirt and trousers one day will arrive at his work next morning divested of either or both garments and ask for more, he having given his clothes to his “uncle”, his “half-father”, his brother or other relative who was in need of them.<sup>35</sup>

Again, it appears that clothes could be a suitable substitute for wages in that they were valuable items of exchange. Hilda Jarman Muir, a Yanyuwa person, recalls being given presents of handkerchiefs by the Aboriginal people living on McArthur Station in the late 1920s. She wrote: “that’s what happened when you met up with people. They just sort of welcomed you and gave you gifts”.<sup>36</sup>

The most blatant case of employers retaining clothes and denying Aboriginal workers the right to exchange clothes, can be seen in the records of the army stationed in Darwin in 1933. Aboriginal men employed by the army were paid at the standard rate of 5 shillings per week of which 2 shillings were deducted and paid into the trust fund. Under the Aboriginal Ordinance it was assumed that food and clothing would make up the rest of the payment. The army provided Aboriginal workers with food; documented as being a “half-ration of meat, bread and vegetables [...] supplemented on occasions by kitchen scraps”.<sup>37</sup> They were also issued with clothes, in the form of a uniform consisting of six white singlets, four blue shirts, three khaki shorts and one hat, per annum. But while the army was content to pay the minimum wage of 5 shillings – the scale for Aboriginal workers – they refused to consider giving Aboriginal workers clothes to keep. The kit issued to Aboriginal workers was regarded as a sort of army uniform and it remained the property of the army.<sup>38</sup>

To ensure that no clothes went missing, the army insisted that each Aboriginal worker maintain a £2 credit in their trust fund to cover any loss of clothing. This was in keeping with the standard army practice of supplying one set of free clothing but then expecting employees to pay for

34. Cited in Willey, *Boss Drover*, p. 100.

35. Beckett, to Basedow, 29 July 1911.

36. Hilda Jarman Muir, *Very Big Journey, My Life as I Remember It* (Canberra, 2004), p. 12.

37. Sec. Military Board, Army Headquarters, Melbourne, from Major, Staff Corps, Troops, 12 October 1933, Darwin, NAA, MP508/1, 82/710/2.

38. For a discussion of army practice see Robert A. Hall, *Black Digger, Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders in the Second World War* (Canberra, 1997).

upkeep and replacement.<sup>39</sup> This bond of £2 was the equivalent of 8 weeks' wages for Aboriginal workers. By contrast £2 for a white worker in the army represented a little over half a week's earnings, with the lowest-paid temporary messengers or stablemen earning £3 3s per week.<sup>40</sup> The army major defended this policy, arguing that the clothing they provided was on a "special scale differing from that provided in random fashion by the average employer in Darwin". The officer noted, however, that it was "a debatable point whether it is in accordance with the Aboriginal regulations by which the clothing issued becomes the unrestricted property of the native".<sup>41</sup>

#### ASSIMILATION POLICY – THE EMPEROR'S NEW CLOTHES

During the 1930s some Aboriginal workers spoke out against the protectionist system arguing that they should have access to cash wages and greater autonomy. Jack Sullivan, a so-called "half-caste" stockworker, demanded cash wages in 1933. He recalled that young Reg Durack supported him, telling his pastoralist father: "Dad, why don't you take notice of what Jack's tellin you? Man enough to handle his own business. Why you don't givim the money?"<sup>42</sup> Similarly, David Cahill, owner of Seven Emus station, in the north-east, believed that Aboriginal stockworkers should have access to cash. He wrote in defence of four drovers, jailed for cattle-killing in 1933, stating:

These boys left here on the 6th of November 1932, to try and get their wages. All they got was ten shillings each for which they had to walk 69 miles in and the same back [...] They left here again on November 27th to try to get some more of their wages from the Protector. [...] I wonder how a salaried official like Dr Cook, drawing £10, or more, per week would like to walk a distance of 138 miles for the sake of collecting ten shillings he had earned five or six months previously. These boys had enough money held by the Protector to keep them until they were employed again, and now instead of getting their wages they are serving a term of imprisonment [...].<sup>43</sup>

By the late 1930s, Aboriginal workers in Darwin were also demanding cash wages. In 1936, a representative of the Darwin Larrakia people protested in the *Northern Standard* newspaper that he was working and drawing 3s a week. He asked: "How can we buy clothes for ourselves and

39. Australian Military Forces, *Standing Order for Clothing, Part 1, Permanent Forces*, 1935, p. 4.

40. "Estimates of Receipts and Expenditure for the year ending 30 June 1933", *Commonwealth Parliamentary Papers*, 1932–33–34 vol. 2, Finance, Department of Finance, pp. 156, 163.

41. Sec. Military Board, Army Headquarters, Melbourne, from Major, Staff Corps, Troops, 12 October 1933; Darwin, NAA, MP508/1, 82/710/2.

42. B. Shaw, *Bangkaiverri: The Story of Jack Sullivan* (Canberra, 1983), pp. 90–91.

43. D. Cahill, *Northern Standard*, 25 April 1933.

keep our families on 3s?"<sup>44</sup> The value of 3s at that time was little more than pocket money. One shilling would buy a ticket for the cinema, while a loaf of bread was 8 pence.<sup>45</sup>

But when the Commonwealth government finally responded to this lobby, it was to introduce the assimilation policy, and this policy was not what the protesters had had in mind. In 1938, Jack McEwen, Minister for the Interior, introduced the new policy which aimed: "to raise the status of the aboriginal [...] to such a degree as would justify the conferring of full citizenship rights upon these people by an appropriate authority, each person being considered as an individual. Such person would, of course, be entitled to all the privileges of white workers."<sup>46</sup> The assimilation policy was based on the assumption that the barrier to equal rights and citizenship for Aboriginal people was not the fundamental inequality of the law, but the inadequacy of the Aboriginal people themselves. It was assumed that an innate inferiority existed which might, with suitable training and guidance, be gradually overcome. The question of clothing and cash wages was an important part of the new policy.

In 1948 Aboriginal workers on pastoral stations in the Northern Territory were granted "cash" wages. I use the term "cash" hesitantly, because in reality a system of accounting was put in place whereby wages were recorded and clothing and other personal items were deducted, with the resulting credit being accrued in a trust fund. No cash changed hands. The report which instigated this system was written by V.G. Carrington, Acting Director of Native Affairs, who reported on "the conditions of native employment", having visited the Barkly Tablelands and Victoria River districts in the Northern Territory in 1945. He found that most stations were not paying any wages, having been exempt on the grounds that they were maintaining relatives and dependants of workers. Station managers were simply providing food, clothing and tobacco.<sup>47</sup>

Carrington was opposed to this practice on the grounds that it did nothing to further the government's policy of assimilation. He claimed that: "the fact that they get clothing, tobacco and such things as razors and mirrors at regular intervals, provides no incentive to improve, or to care for possessions, both of which are important if natives are to advance in the social scale".<sup>48</sup> Carrington's recommendations were that Aboriginal workers be paid wages at a scale that would allow them to buy their own clothes:

44. "The Larrakeyah Tribe, Deputation to Visit Col. Weddell", *Northern Standard*, 24 March 1936.

45. Rowe, "Aboriginal Employment and Conditions in the Northern Territory".

46. *Northern Standard*, 23 August 1938.

47. V.G. Carrington, Report to Administrator, Northern Territory, 10 October 1945, NBAC, ANU, VRD, Bovril Deposit, 42/14

48. *Ibid.*, p. 3.

Males	Under 16 years	1 5s per week
	16–18 years	£1 per week
	18–21 years	£1 10s per week
	Over 21 years	£2 5s per week
Drovers	With cattle	£3 per week
	With plant only	£2 per week
Females		10s per week

In addition to these wages, employers were to provide accommodation, a laundry, firewood, and medical benefits. The male wage was intended to allow a married worker to support his wife and one child. Additional children would be supported through the Child Endowment scheme, while old and infirm people on stations would become the responsibility of the Department of Native Affairs.<sup>49</sup>

Carrington indicated what he believed to be a reasonable issue of clothing and other necessities to workers per annum. His scale for male workers was six shirts, six trousers, four pairs of boots, two hats, one sweater, one overcoat, two blankets, four handkerchiefs, four towels, one mosquito net, one campsheet, two razors, two mirrors, four combs and four pipes. These items were estimated to cost £22 9s per annum.<sup>50</sup> Women workers were to be given six dresses, six yards of calico, one sweater, four towels, four handkerchiefs, four combs, two mirrors, one pair of scissors, one blanket, one swagcover, one mosquito net and needles and thread. Women who were not working would receive the same amount, but only four dresses instead of six.

While the Carrington report was seen as a step forward, in reality there had merely been a simple exchange of clothing for wages. Whereas before, wages were withheld and clothing supplied, now wages were supplied and clothing withheld. According to Mary Anne Jebb, the Carrington system, along with aspects of the New Guinea system were incorporated into Western Australian regulations in 1950 and applied to Kimberley cattle stations. Dave Pullen, then Welfare Officer in the Kimberleys, similarly noted that £1 would not cover the cost of clothing for a man and his family.<sup>51</sup>

The idea of paying for clothes might have been a step forward if the Aboriginal workers had gained some autonomy in their ability to choose, purchase, and give away their clothes. But in fact, this type of autonomy was precisely what Carrington intended to avoid. He suggested that a patrol officer be given the authority to see that issues of clothing were “made only as required and that money was spent wisely”. Clothing was still issued at regular intervals through the station-run stores, no doubt

49. *Ibid.*, pp. 10–11.

50. *Ibid.*, p. 5.

51. Pullen cited in Jebb, *Blood, Sweat and Welfare*, pp. 220, 225.

offering the same quality of clothing as had previously been supplied. In addition, there was to be no opportunity for Aboriginal workers to give their clothes away. The Patrol Officer was to explain “that if clothes were ill-treated or items lost, gambled or given away, they would have to go without other things to replace them”.<sup>52</sup>

A second problem raised by the introduction of wages to pay for clothes was that the price of clothes remained in the control of the employer. The patrol officer was supposed to prevent station managers from charging exorbitant prices for clothes, but at least one previous case suggests that this policy was less than foolproof. Castle and Hagan discuss an incident which occurred in Queensland in the 1930s where the local Protector was allegedly making a profit from Aboriginal clothing purchases.<sup>53</sup>

Once the Carrington Report was put into practice, and Aboriginal stock-workers were paid wages sufficient to buy clothes there is little evidence of any substantial change in practice. In 1950, the station records for Victoria River Downs record the purchases of the “stockboys”. The typical male worker was paid £1 per week plus food and tobacco and was required to purchase his own clothes, other small necessary items, and dresses for his wife. The price of these goods accounted for a substantial portion of wages. Perhaps most significant was that the workers only purchased goods when they were actively working, with a complete set of clothing being purchased each October at the beginning of the working season. None of the workers bought clothes at the amounts suggested by the Carrington Report. During an average of six months per annum no purchases were made and the accounts indicate that during these months the workers were on holidays. Thus it appears that the original practice of not providing clothes for “walkabout” had continued into the assimilation era.

## CONCLUSION

Prior to the 1950s Aboriginal workers in the Northern Territory were expected to work for little more than food, clothing, and tobacco. These items were officially regarded as an appropriate substitute for cash wages. My research suggests, however, that the way in which employers provided clothing for workers makes it difficult to equate this clothing with remuneration. Most employers regarded clothing as a means to ensure that their workers were able to complete their work in a satisfactory manner. Clothes were a uniform that Aboriginal workers were expected to wear whilst working. For clothing to be regarded as a wage they would need to

52. Carrington Report, p. 8.

53. Robert Castle and Jim Hagan, “Regulation of Aboriginal Labour in Queensland: Protectors, Agreements and Trust Accounts 1897–1965”, *Labour History*, 72 (May 1997), pp. 69–70.



be given for personal use and not merely for use during working hours; they should be given to Aboriginal workers to keep on a permanent basis; they should be of a certain value, as opposed to the free hand-me-downs often provided; and they should be given at regular intervals.

That Aboriginal people sought to take their clothes away with them when they left their place of work indicates that they did not reject the idea of clothing as payment. That many employers in the Northern Territory failed to provide adequate clothes indicates that they themselves were unwilling to honour the expected payment to Aboriginal workers. Even when cash wages were introduced in the 1950s, the situation was scarcely improved, as Aboriginal workers were still being provided with clothing through company stores which was of poor quality and insufficient quantity. The rhetoric of government officials and employers in the Northern Territory suggested that in kind payments were part of an ethos of protection of Aboriginal workers. Actual practice reveals a colonial culture in which the exploitation of Aboriginal workers was widely accepted and rarely questioned.