

Mission Statements: textuality and morality in the colonial archive

ANNA JOHNSTON
University of Tasmania

It seems to me that a spectre has haunted Australian culture, the spectre of Truganini,' wrote Bernard Smith in his 1980 Boyer lectures (9). This 'spectre', of course, was a real Nuenone woman with a complex history and considerable importance in Aboriginal community politics, but Smith's identification of Truganini's centrality in Australian culture draws rather more on her textual manifestations in the colonial archive and her ongoing place within the narrative of colonial history in this country. This textual spectre of Truganini, the one which circulates through the colonial archive and postcolonial rewritings of that archive, is so influential because it ghosts in the presence of complex, ambivalent, and ambiguous colonial relations and works as an embodiment of many narratives of cross-cultural encounters. It is an image haunted by the key controversies of colonial cultures: gender, race, and morality. Such 'spectres' continue to influence some of the most interesting historical work in Australia today, from Smith's 1980 call for a history of troubled white conscience in this country, to the ongoing and cumulative project of Henry Reynolds' recent publications. This paper addresses another of these historical phantasms, the colonial missionary. The figure of the missionary arguably stands in direct relation to the figure of Aboriginal women like Truganini, as the ambivalent arbiter of relationships between black and white Australians, and as the textual amanuensis through which many of the controversies of the early colonies were reported. Lancelot Edward Threlkeld, the sole London Missionary Society missionary formally appointed to Australia in the period up to 1850, functions in this paper as an exemplar of the colonial missionary, as one of the most interesting and controversial missionaries in the colonial archive.

If, as Smith stated, 'Australian morality is a history of damaged goods' (14), Australian textuality is deeply embedded within this morality. The colonial archives, from the first days of British occupation, are deeply imbued with the complex and

contested morality of settler-invasion in this country. This archive is replete with details of the debates in the colonial newspapers, the letters and petitions to the colonial governors and to British members of parliament, and the pamphlets, statements, and monographs published by public opinion-makers, many of which fiercely debated the moral consequences of colonisation and the penal system. The texts written by Threlkeld about his experiences in Australia in the 1820s and 1830s work together with those produced by other missionaries and other early Europeans in Australia with humanitarian interests and access to venues of publication to contribute an early humanitarian focus to this archive. In historical terms, such people fit into Smith's history of the concerned white conscience. Here, however, I am specifically interested in looking at the texts produced by these individuals, in analysing the ways in which these ambivalent texts of colonial Australia participate in, as well as disrupt, conventions of colonial textuality.

These ambivalent missionary figures are crucial to an exploration what Nicholas Thomas has called the 'fractured' nature of colonialism, where '[c]olonialism is not a unitary project but a fractured one, riddled with contradictions and exhausted as much by its own internal debates as by the resistance of the colonized' (51). Such a project is important because it seeks to deconstruct a common perception of colonialism, that it was monolithic, uncontested and efficacious (12), and this deconstruction is significant because, as Thomas suggests, such perceptions allow an historical guilt but a blameless present on the part of contemporary settler subjects. Such a 'culture of forgetting,' as contemporary commentators have pointed out, allows contemporary white Australia to distance the unpalatable narratives of cross-cultural relations in an unproblematic way, in order to clear the ground for a contemporary politics of dispossession. The ongoing and vociferous debates in recent years about the Stolen Generations, the lack of a national apology, and the ongoing negotiations for native title attest to the continued appeal of "'the cults of disremembering'" (WE Stanner, qtd Griffiths 8). With an exploration of missionary figures in the colonial landscape it becomes clear that such debates are hardly new, that equally heated arguments have continued since the very earliest days of the colonies. These arguments are here traced through the well-intentioned, benevolent men (and they were mostly men), exemplified by Lancelot Threlkeld, who were both on the side of the white imperial and colonial interests, and on the side of Aboriginal and humanitarian interests. The writings of such men attest to what Tom Griffiths has called 'the racial intimacy of the frontier, a world where white and black knew one another by name, borrowed traditions and skills, learnt and taught as well as fought' (10-11). Uncovering this ambivalent, ambiguous body of texts in the colonial archive promises to produce new insights into the importance of colonial textuality in the historicising of current concerns.

Lancelot Edward Threlkeld had had a substantial missionary career before he arrived in Australia. Initially trained as an actor in London, the young Threlkeld then experienced a religious conversion and volunteered for missionary services in Africa.¹ Like the young schoolmaster in David Malouf's *Remembering Babylon*, Threlkeld's enthusiasm for the masculine testing ground of African heathenism was

frustrated when the LMS chose instead to send him to the Antipodes. In 1818 Threlkeld and John Williams were appointed together to a Polynesian mission station (Ra'iatea). In 1824 Threlkeld's first wife died and he left for Sydney to find a new wife, joining the ship carrying the LMS Deputation of Daniel Tyerman and George Bennet. In the relationship developed *en route* between these men, the seeds of the LMS's Australian mission were sown. Tyerman and Bennet organised the Reid's Mistake mission during their residence in Australia.² Threlkeld and his new wife Sarah Arndell were both commissioned to undertake the sole LMS mission in Australia in this period, at Lake Macquarie near Newcastle in 1825.

Threlkeld's position within the colonial culture of early Australia makes him a particularly interesting figure. He appears to have situated himself on the borders of state governmentalities and evangelical concerns, between a 'man of god' and a man who frequented the colonial law courts, newspapers, and public forums. It is precisely Threlkeld's liminality, arguably, which led to his estrangement from more conservative religious institutions and individuals, yet it is a position which he evidently relished and encouraged. Threlkeld's mission was a particularly interesting case, however, because of his extensive use and manipulation of texts in order to vindicate his position within colonial society and leave a record of his endeavours in the colonial archive.

Threlkeld appears in the historical records as an undoubtedly difficult and stubborn man, yet his naïve assumption that colonial environments might allow such leeway in its public representatives is intriguing and engaging. Threlkeld entered fierce and public debates with colonial authorities such as Samuel Marsden and John Dunmore Lang; he gave evidence relating to the Myall Creek massacre; and he published a vituperative *Statement Chiefly Relating to the Formation and Abandonment of a Mission to the Aborigines of New South Wales; Addressed to the Serious Consideration of the Directors of the London Missionary Society* (1828), which accused the London Missionary Society of 'treat[ing] your Missionaries in print as brethren, in your private communications as an inferior order of beings, hardly worthy of notice, or at least as the most suspicious characters. It is high time that a different feeling should exist' (27). Threlkeld's combative nature, his ambivalent position in colonial society, and his inherent challenge to the colonial order in Australia, was manifested in his writings and his strategic manipulation of textuality. In the debates between and surrounding Threlkeld, the LMS, Samuel Marsden, and other colonial and missionary personnel, the highly provisional, improvisational nature of missionary work in the colony was played out explicitly. Threlkeld's interventions into the excesses of colonial settler practices, particularly in the arena of sexuality and gender relations, were particularly significant.

Threlkeld's own location at the interstices of various colonial institutions and communities was clearly shown in his textual justifications of his work. He stated:

'During my residence in New South Wales I have sustained a threefold office ... 1st. As protector, to which circumstances called me ever since 1825. 2nd. As interpreter, in many cases which unhappily occurred at

the Supreme Court. 3rd. As evangelist, in making known the Gospel to the aborigines in their own tongue.' (qtd. in King 75)

It is possible to see, even in this abbreviated description of Threlkeld's roles, the many ways in which he could offend the politics of missionary, settler, and judicial communities. It is also evident that Threlkeld's position as 'protector' and 'interpreter' placed him directly between the interests of settlers and Aborigines in judicial, land, and human rights issues. This last triumvirate of cross-cultural confrontations were those central to the development and continuance of the new settler colony. Threlkeld's writings were thus embedded within the discursive regimes of these key cultural interests. His interference in such affairs won him few white friends.

As Niel Gunson notes, Threlkeld was 'neither the first missionary appointed to the Aborigines nor the first European to extend any real degree of sympathy to the problems of adjustment' (Threlkeld, *Australian Reminiscences* 7), but he was one of the first to make any practical difference through mission work. Most significantly, he started linguistic collection of the Awabakal language, and in this he was something of a pioneer. This was probably his most notable achievement, but it was also, of course, a central part of the LMS's strategy for evangelisation. Threlkeld wrote in the introduction to his *Australian Grammar* (1834):

To the mere Philosopher this grammar will afford abundant matter for speculation, in addition to which, the Christian will perceive another instance of the Providence of HIM who has said, 'I will draw all men to me.' For this object alone the laborious task has been undertaken, and must be considered only as the prelude to the attempt of bringing the Aborigines of New South Wales to the knowledge of God our Saviour. (iii)

For Threlkeld, then, the process of transcribing Aboriginal languages was always one of both philosophical inquiry and evangelical necessity. His perspective on Aboriginal languages, though, was surprisingly progressive for his time and his evangelical background.

His work on these languages, however, was taken up in distinctly colonialist discourses. The 1892 edition of many of his early works was compiled by John Fraser, whose preface stated:

This volume is issued by the Government of New South Wales, as a record of the language of native tribes that are rapidly disappearing from the coasts of Eastern Australia ... They have decayed and are decaying in spite of the fostering care of our Colonial Governments. (v)

The incorporation of Threlkeld's linguistic work here into a broader colonial discourse about the 'dying' Aboriginal race and the ways in which the colonial government was 'smoothing the dying pillow' was ironic, given that Threlkeld had

detailed local knowledge of the real problems of settler communities and their treatment of the prior Aboriginal inhabitants. He also knew that the government's care was often less than 'fostering.'

However, Threlkeld both registered his disgust at the aggressive white practices of land and population clearance, *and* participated in its colonialist discursive modes. For example, in his translation into Awabakal of the Gospel of St. Luke, Threlkeld's prefatory note stated that

It is a matter of fact that the aborigines of these colonies and of the numerous islands of the Pacific Ocean are rapidly becoming extinct. The cause of their extinction is mysterious. Does it arise from the iniquity of this portion of the human race having become full? –, or that the times of these Gentiles are fulfilled? –, or, is it but the natural effects of iniquity producing its consequent ruin to the workers thereof in accordance with the natural order of God's government of the universe? (*An Australian Language* 125)

Threlkeld's split colonial vision is particularly evident in this passage in his apparent blindness to the acts of colonial violence, both physical, sexual, and cultural, which he elsewhere noticed decimating Aboriginal populations. Textually, he falls back on an evangelical 'dying race' narrative in spite of his contradictory experiences. The gap that is evident here is that between the well-rehearsed tropes of colonial discourse and the more complex, ambivalent realities of cross-cultural contact. This double vision remains unresolved in Threlkeld's writing and complicates any easy categorisation of his place within colonial culture. It is therefore overly simplistic to reclaim his work as a progressive part of a cross-cultural project³ – he was evidently equally pleased to be identified, though at different times and in different ways, with the authority and authenticity of both Aboriginal Australia and white colonial institutions. His texts reverberate with the tensions inherent in such contested identifications.

However Threlkeld also explicitly recognised and promoted the perception of the *political* nature of his linguistic work. In his *Reminiscences*, he wrote:

There were no other means of acquiring the language, but direct from the natives, and it was maintained by many in the colony that the Blacks had no language at all but were only a race of the monkey tribe! This was a convenient assumption, for if it could be proved that the Aborigines of New South Wales were only a species of wild beasts, there could be no guilt attributed to those who shot them off or poisoned them as cumberers of the earth. (46)

As Threlkeld noted here, work on Aboriginal languages was critically political, and a key part of his deliberate intervention between the aggressive white settlers of early Australia and the increasingly dispossessed Aborigines.

Ironically, the acquisition of Aboriginal language could well have been the least political part of his work, as it could be justified by missionary policy as well as by a kind of scholarly good-will. Threlkeld did defend his work in this way, noting that the 'almost sovereign contempt with which the aboriginal language of New South Wales has been treated in this colony ... [is] not highly indicative of the love of sciences in this part of the globe' (*An Australian Language* 90). It seems, however, that Threlkeld deliberately cultivated the political aspects of this work. With his growing skills in Aboriginal languages and translation, he volunteered to interpret for Aboriginal defendants and witnesses in the law courts. He consistently argued for Aboriginal witnesses to be heard in criminal court cases and facilitated the airing of their testimony and perspectives through his translations.

Threlkeld also operated within the colonial environment in ways surprising to our general assumptions about black-white relations at this time. Threlkeld's acknowledgment of Aboriginal assistance in compiling his linguistic texts is significant. He was forthcoming throughout his published writings about the assistance he received, particularly from an Aboriginal man, variously named M'Gill (McGill) or Biraban. From the very beginning of his time in New South Wales, Threlkeld noted the assistance of his 'native informant': 'One great advantage has been obtained in an Aborigine, who attached himself to us from the first, and whose knowledge of the English language is sufficient to render him highly valuable, and the pains he takes that my pronunciation may be correct, affords a convincing proof that they have an equal share of intellectual power with others of the human race' (*Aboriginal Mission* 3). Biraban was repeatedly acknowledged formally in these publications, such as the following note in *An Australian Grammar*: 'An aboriginal of this part of the colony was my almost daily companion for many years, and to his intelligence I am principally indebted for much of my knowledge respecting the structure of the language. Biraban was his native name, meaning 'eagle-hawk,' but the English called him M'Gill' (88). In his *Reminiscences*, Threlkeld noted that 'M'Gill, a noble specimen of his race, my companion and teacher in the language for many years, but no more, could take a very good drawing of vessels especially' (59).⁴

Threlkeld did not shrink from condemning ill-treatment of Aborigines by settlers. In December 1825, for example, he wrote that: 'it is not at all surprising that men are murdered in the Interior, when even in the vicinity of a town [Aboriginal men] ... are grossly maltreated by the prisoners on account of the Black women' (91) in reference to an incident where a white man was beating local Aborigines because they prevented him from taking a ten year old Aboriginal girl. His willingness to attest to the sexual and physical abuse of Aboriginal people, and particularly young girls, was conspicuous given that many other members of colonial society chose to ignore such extremes of colonialist behaviour. Threlkeld's vocation clearly played a part in his emphasis on the vulnerability of women and children, but his willingness to bear public witness to such colonial atrocities also indicated his genuine humanitarian concern for the fate of indigenous peoples in a colonial culture. Not surprisingly, such publicising of the colony's dirty washing won him few friends.

The level of acrimonious debate around Threlkeld and his Lake Macquarie

mission, which resulted in the LMS withdrawing their financial support by 1826, proved that the questions raised by his presence about the role of missionaries in new colonial states, particularly in settler states, remained unanswered by the end of Threlkeld's missionary work for the LMS. The bitterness which existed in sections of the colonial society towards Threlkeld's interventions in the legal system and in cross-cultural sexual relations, in particular, suggest that he managed to touch on precisely those issues which were integral to the maintenance and development of settler society in Australia. Threlkeld's timing was a key factor in this. As many have noted, the 1820s saw the spread of pastoral settlement, which in turn brought about a significant change in the pattern of race relations. As land became a desirable commodity, race relations became much more aggressive and uncontrolled. As Gunson argues, at this time '[m]en who thought like Threlkeld were generally held to be deluded and a threat to the good order of the community. The failure of earlier missions and attempts to civilise only increased the opposition to humane experiments' (Threlkeld, *Australian Reminiscences* 5).

Significantly, too, Threlkeld had little support from either the influential church men in the colony, such as Samuel Marsden, or from his home Society in London. Both of these authorities had decided that Threlkeld was spending money excessively and fruitlessly, and withdrew both their personal and financial support. The comparative lack of 'glamour' associated with the salvation of the Aboriginal 'heathen', too, had never helped Threlkeld's cause. Images of the *zenana* women in India and the Polynesian 'noble savages' both made more appealing textual subjects for a discriminating evangelical audience back Home. Representations of the Australian Aborigines, by contrast, specifically *because* they were perceived as embodying the 'basest savagery,' were not as easily incorporated into appealing texts for the evangelical British audience. Threlkeld himself noted that

It is to be feared that the high state of excitement to which the religious public have been accustomed, will render the appearance of this mission very unpromising, there being nothing here to encourage the feeble-minded; no moving on the tops of the mulberry-trees; no shaking of the bones; but all dry, dry, very dry scattered bones, in the midst of a waste howling wilderness. (*A Statement* 29)

It is interesting to note here that the kind of existential colonial crisis engendered in many writers and artists by the apparent resistance of the Australian landscape (Marcus Clarke's 'weird melancholy,' for example) is here evident in Threlkeld's writing too. For Threlkeld, of course, this was a dual crisis of colonial anxiety and religious isolation – even within the white colonial culture religious philosophies were open to ridicule. The 'morality' of the colonial archive is thus a double-edged sword: while Threlkeld could produce large amounts of information about the Awabakal people, in particular, and what he assumed was their 'need' for salvation, he could not promote their cause in an appealing enough manner to ensure important moral support from Britain.

The presence of the white settler community also created a complicated environment for Threlkeld's evangelisation, and ensured that his writings raised controversial issues about class and colonial degeneracy. The working out of a particular set of European theories about racial (and classed) hierarchies and the potential of the environment to induce 'degradation' was central to many of the discussions about the Australian colony as a whole and particularly about the work of religious personnel such as Threlkeld. Threlkeld's commitment to exposing the excesses of settler culture repeatedly mobilised such ideas, and evidently confused his own attempts to categorise or judge the black and white inhabitants of the colonial culture.

His ability to move between these two communities meant that Threlkeld was, in some ways, the very embodiment of the ambivalent figure of the settler familiar from postcolonial theory. His positioning on the boundaries of black and white Australia, and his willingness to mimic the authenticity and authority of either community at different, strategic moments of colonial encounters, mean that his texts, too, evince a doubled discursive positioning. His perspective on 'the Aboriginal race,' as degraded but salvageable, placed him in a curious position between the two cultures – he neither accepted the Aboriginal communities' integrity as a survival culture, nor advocated the (physical and discursive) displacement of that culture by the settlers. The complications of Threlkeld's position were, of course, that he was simultaneously an agent of publicising the 'visible and uncontestable signs' of colonial violence *and* the agent promoting the practices and policies of bourgeois hegemony. It is this double vision which makes Threlkeld's writings and his position within colonial society so interesting, yet disturbing.

This is the fundamentally unresolvable tension which haunts Threlkeld's writing, writing that was, in this manner, characteristic of the tensions of missionary discourse as a genre. Located somewhere on the spectrum between the violently colonial and the humanitarian christian, these texts trouble the easy categorisation of colonial cultures and the various agents of empire within them.

As a conclusion to this paper, it is important to signal the ways in which colonial evangelisation may have opened up spaces in colonial culture which were unlikely to have been foreseen by the early missionaries, and which continue to have ongoing effects. Threlkeld and his texts have lately proved to occupy a new place within New South Wales local history and have made clear the extent to which colonial texts can be transformed into key artefacts of a postcolonial culture. In 1997 the Newcastle region commemorated the bicentenary of white settlement in the Newcastle-Hunter region. As a part of the celebrations, an accommodation centre was opened for the families of Aboriginal people in the area who are receiving medical care at the John Hunter Hospital. It is called Yallarwah Place, and was designated as a Bicentenary memorial for the region. It was opened by the Deputy Premier of New South Wales and blessed and smoked by members of the Anglican and Catholic churches, and by Awabakal elders. The physical memorial itself is a circle of six large stones, reminiscent of the Awabakal stone circle arrangements described by Lancelot Threlkeld. The website describes the memorial: 'In the centre of the stones there is a

seventh stone with a bronze book. The right-hand page reads: 'Yallarwah Circle of Reflection. In memory of the Aboriginal people, European settlers and convicts who lived and died in our shared Hunter History 1797-1997.' The left-hand page reads 'On enquiry of my black tutor, McGill, he informed me that the tradition was, that the Eagle-Hawks brought these stones and placed them together' Rev. Lancelot Edward Threlkeld 1825-26' ('Yallarwah Place'). The memorial is described as being inspired by the relationship between Threlkeld and Biraban, and the local University donated a framed portrait of the two men, as well as the bronze book. In the same year, the churches of the Hunter region asked the Bible Society in New South Wales to re-print Threlkeld's translation of the Gospel of Luke in Awabakal, a publication which received considerable favourable publicity in the contemporary evangelical press. The *Australian Christian* described the experience of Len Wallam, pastor of the Bunbury Aboriginal Fellowship and member of the Federal Aborigines Board. The description of Wallam's linguistic predicament – 'his dad was punished for speaking his language as a young man, so he actively discouraged his children from using their language to escape being punished also' – curiously writes out the probable implication of evangelical missionaries in the eradication of indigenous languages within a single generation, but instead the 'good news' story is emphasised: 'At the bicentenary of white settlement in the Newcastle Region, the combined churches presented a copy of Luke's Gospel in Awabakal to every family as a gesture of reconciliation. Many of the people wept at discovering part of their lost language in written form' (Moyle 14). That modern evangelists should be the means of returning Awabakal culture to those who had been discouraged by earlier evangelists from maintaining their culture is a profoundly ironic comment on the ongoing effects of colonialism. Colonial textuality, it seems from this instance, continues to underwrite many of our contemporary negotiations of black and white Australia in significant and often surprising ways.

Notes

- ¹ Threlkeld was an actor with the Royal Circus and later the Royalty Theatre prior to his missionary career (Gunson 40). His training in performance techniques seems to have stood him in good stead for his future career as missionary evangelist and controversial public figure. Threlkeld seems always to have been aware of himself as an actor on the colonial stage.
- ² Given the somewhat disastrous nature of the LMS mission here, the naming of it seems fortuitous. In fact, however, it was apparently so named before Threlkeld's arrival "in honor of its discoverer, whose name was Reid, being master of a colonial coasting vessel, and intending to run into Port Hunter, whither Colonial craft then resorted for coals, which were dug out of the cliff by their crews; instead of Port Hunter, this sagacious seaman took his bark into this opening, and thus, in memory of his error, the name has been given" (qtd. in Champion, 'Part I' 313).
- ³ Reynolds's *This Whispering in Our Hearts* does this to some extent.
- ⁴ Threlkeld noted that a drawing by McGill was sent to the Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge, the evangelical publishing organisation who partly sponsored the first publication of Threlkeld's *Australian Grammar*, as proof of Aboriginal intellectual capabilities (*Australian Reminiscences* 59).

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