

# Constructing Aboriginality: Archibald Meston's Literary Journalism, 1870–1924

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No one ever got further into the mind of Black Brother than Archie Meston. And Black Brother never had a truer friend. (Obituary, *Bulletin* 20 Mar. 1924: 26)

Archibald Meston's political appointments and Government-sponsored reports, two of which provided a basis for the ironically entitled Aboriginal Protection Act of 1897, (*Queensland Aboriginals* and "Report on the Aboriginals") are often referred to in analyses of Queensland history.<sup>1</sup> This professedly humane legislation, frequently identified as a principal determinant of Aboriginal post-settlement experience, established a rigid system of reserves amounting to a Queensland version of Apartheid. By encouraging the imposition of minutely detailed bureaucratic controls, it destroyed Aboriginal autonomy, in practice until new legislation was passed in 1965 and 1971 (Rowley 179; Loos, "A Chapter of Contact" 22). Beyond the leading part which Meston played in the framing of the Act and in his office of Protector, he acted also as racial intermediary and interpreter of Aboriginal culture to the state's white population. The hundreds of poems, stories and articles, many dealing with Aboriginal issues, which he published over the fifty-year span between 1870 and his death on 11 March 1924, were Meston's chief means of raising his profile and maintaining himself in these roles.<sup>2</sup> The significance of these publications has yet to be explored. This preliminary study aims to extend cultural understanding by examining the shaping of indigenous and Anglo-European interaction in Meston's literary journalism, work which, both in its period and subsequently, contributed significantly to the complex dynamics of Queensland race relations.

Meston was born near Aberdeen, Scotland in 1851, and, aged eight, migrated to Australia with his parents. He grew up on a farm near Ulmarra on the Clarence River, married in Sydney, and in 1875 became editor of the *Ipswich Observer*. From 1878 to 1882 he represented Rosewood in the Queensland Legislative Assembly. After spending a year in Townsville as editor of the *Townsville Herald*, he moved with his family to a homestead block near Kamerunga on the Barron River. As editor of the *Cairns Chronicle*, he lobbied the State Government frequently on Cairns' behalf and, as Chairman of the Divisional Board in 1883, helped secure the inland railway line for the Barron Valley route. In Brisbane from 1888, he lived by journalism and by Government commissions such as the *Queensland Railway and Tourist Guide* which he produced in 1889. In the same year he led two expeditions, the second a government-sponsored plant- and mineral-collecting expedition into the Bellenden Ker Ranges. A third expedition followed in 1891–1892.

Meston's "Report on the Aborigines of Queensland" was based on a journey of 8,000 kilometers "by steamer, whaleboat, dinghy, horse and on foot" (1) undertaken over four months in 1895 through the most remote parts of the State, including the unsettled parts of Cape York.<sup>3</sup> As a reward for his services, in April 1896 he was appointed Protector of Aborigines for southern Queensland. To his chagrin, the senior position in the north, where, as he wrote in his Report, "the most difficult and serious work is to be done" (14) was given to Dr. Walter E. Roth. As Protector, Meston arranged for the transportation of over four hundred Aborigines from locations in southern and western Queensland to four main coastal reserves, the largest being Bogimbah Creek on Fraser Island. Although he maintained that this intervention was a success, the Aborigines' exile from their homelands, the intermingling of hostile tribes, and the poor nutrition and health care on the reserves resulted in hardship, despair and death (Evans, Saunders and Cronin 345–7; Evans and Walker 74–91; Thorpe 63). Meston's aggressive methods of control, which included severe beatings and the overnight handcuffing of men and women to trees (Evans and Walker 83–85), contributed to this outcome, and it is against this background that his credentials as spokesman for Aborigines must be assessed. He remained Protector until 1904, when he was retrenched in favour of Roth, who was appointed Chief Protector for the whole state (Ganter and Kidd 548). With an interval in Sydney from 1909 as Director of the Queensland Intelligence and Tourist Bureau, Meston continued in Brisbane as Government consultant and free-lance journalist until his death from tetanus on 11 March 1924.

The potency of Meston's journalism in constructing racial attitudes both within and beyond Queensland is indicated by the range and variety of the publications in which his work appeared. They included the *Antipodean*, the *Australasian Sketcher*, the *Australian Town and Country Journal*, the *Boomerang*, the *Brisbane*

*Courier*, the *Bulletin* (Sydney), the *Cairns Chronicle*, the *Cairns Post*, the *Catholic Advocate*, the *Daily Mail*, the *Humpybong Halcyon*, the *Ipswich Observer*, the *Johnstone River Advocate*, the *Lone Hand*, the *Morning Bulletin* (Rockhampton), the *North Queensland Register*, the *Queenslander*, *Steele Rudd's Magazine*, the *Sun*, the *Sydney Mail*, the *Sydney Morning Herald*, the *Townsville Herald*, the *Truth*, the *United Graziers Journal*, and the *World's News*. His exposure to Queensland readers was enhanced when his *Geographic History of Queensland* was glowingly reviewed following publication in 1895 and adopted as a text book in State Schools.<sup>4</sup> Meston's influence continued long after his death in memoirs and newspaper reminiscences,<sup>5</sup> and later in professional histories.<sup>6</sup> *Cummins and Campbell's Monthly Magazine* republished articles selected by his son, E. A. Meston, in two widely-separated series: "Memories of the Late Archibald Meston" (January 1934–December 1936) and "Mestonian Flashes" (August 1954–May 1957).<sup>7</sup>

Fortunately for anyone attempting to chart it now, Meston's vast *corpus* often repeats narratives and situations, while the ideas and attitudes expressed hardly varied in the half-century of publication. His work exemplifies the processes by which popular constructions based on eighteenth-century primitivist idealism, Romantic adulation for nature, and Victorian concepts of racial evolution and decline continued to submerge Aboriginal culture and voice. Newspapers sometimes published personal attacks on Meston, produced by groups or individuals who feared the economic consequences of the racial policies which he helped to implement.<sup>8</sup> The fact that the popular press continued also to accommodate his complex representations of Aborigines nevertheless indicates that these same representations were partly or wholly acceptable to contemporary readers, many of whom may have been reassured by the strongly liberal and benevolent elements in Meston's approach.

In almost every piece, Meston claims authority on the basis of first-hand experience. "Old blacks" indicated to him the rock at Cape Direction beside which Bayley, the boatswain on the *Fly*, was speared (*Bulletin* 25 Aug. 1921: 22);<sup>9</sup> he interviewed Aborigines who witnessed the "final scene of [the] great tragedy" of Leichhardt's lost expedition ("Mystery" 11); and he questioned elders who remembered the deaths of Kennedy's men at Weymouth Bay.<sup>10</sup> This method of authenticating fictionalized versions of colonial interaction was defensive, since Meston had little schooling and was frequently ridiculed for what was judged to be irrelevant erudition in fields which ranged from natural history through ancient and prehistory, mythology and classical texts, to Carlyle and Romantic poetry, especially Byron.<sup>11</sup> He was known as "the Sacred Ibis," from esoteric references in an extravagantly pretentious speech which he delivered as a young man to the Legislative Assembly.<sup>12</sup> His repeated claims to empirical knowledge of Aborigines nevertheless succeeded in constructing him as an expert, in political circles as well as in the popular mind.<sup>13</sup>

Meston's lack of formal training was a point of strong contrast with his rival, Roth, who, like other anthropologists working in Australia in the period, had qualified in science at overseas universities. A fluency in the dialect of the Clarence River tribe obtained in childhood nevertheless helped to offset the limitations of Meston's education,<sup>14</sup> and he mimicked professional practice by visiting and documenting remote tribes.<sup>15</sup> Dozens of notebooks among his papers in the Oxley Library contain glossaries of Aboriginal words recorded in all parts of Queensland, and testify to his long-standing enthusiasm for indigenous culture. Meston's articles and official reports further upheld his expert status by printing selections from his glossaries,<sup>16</sup> but disputes sometimes arose in newspapers over his audacious interpretations, which included the assertion that Cook misapplied the Endeavour River tribal word for "big toe" to the animal he named "kangaroo" ("Origin"). Neither Meston's notes and reports nor his newspaper accounts bear comparison as professional writing with Roth's patient documenting and illustrating of all aspects of tribal life, records which were subsequently published in scholarly volumes.<sup>17</sup>

Meston's assumption that study could only increase European respect for Aboriginal culture was nevertheless soundly based. He recommended learning as a responsibility accruing to imperial control, and in an unnamed typescript, remarked sarcastically, in combined nationalist and liberal mode: "Now that England has enjoyed for more than 100 years her possessory title to Australia, inquiries are be[ing] made by certain scientists and others as to [Aborigines'] habits and language." He advocated retention of Aboriginal names in districts newly opened to settlement, and anticipated recent liberal trends by recording and promoting tribal names for locations where European nomenclature was already established.<sup>18</sup> Above all, he passionately defended the opinion, then rare, that Aboriginal social organization and land occupation were indeed ancient. One of his more bombastic assertions, which made a virtue of incongruous comparisons, ran as follows:

They had no storied urn or animated busts, no marble temples, no Pantheons or Coliseums, no wondrous halls of Karnak, no Temples of Isis or Jupiter, no pyramids of Cheops, or Cyphrones, or Mycerinus, but they have outlived all the ancient architectural races, although their camps were mostly constructed with "roof of air and walls of wind," and their dead bodies went back into their mother earth and vanished in oblivion!<sup>19</sup> ("Black Man" 9)

Meston's affirmations of expert status were enhanced by his newspaper accounts of experiences with Aborigines which may have been actual, but which are also recognizable as tropes in contemporary romantic and imperialist fiction. He repeatedly states that he participated, aged nineteen, in a bora initiation rite and

that he observed other boras.<sup>20</sup> “The Bride of Caparra,” published at Christmas 1896, is one of many stories in which a named Aboriginal friend—in this case, Milbirrie—attends Meston in his adventures, on the model of Alan Quartermain and Umslopogaas in Rider Haggard’s novels. Like Quartermain also, Meston was honoured with a native name. He signed his “Land of the Crocodile” series in the *Bulletin* “Maroogaline,” compiled from the Clarence River words for “strong hand.” The implied heroic stance persists in his vociferous admiration for selected masculine aspects of Aboriginal culture, especially weapons and the arts of war,<sup>21</sup> hunting and fishing,<sup>22</sup> tracking skills<sup>23</sup> and message sticks.<sup>24</sup> Later he reminisced about an idyllic Christmas passed with a wild tribe on Cape York, in such a way as to relate Aboriginal warrior status to a romantically reconstructed Gaelic past:

Behind us towered a magnificent granite mountain [. . .]. One of the blacks had been born at the foot of that mountain, near the waterfall, and in the morning he told me the ghost of his father had come down in the night and spoke to him. Which at once recalled Fingal calling to a ghost of his father, in his Ossianic poem, “and Trenmor came from his hill, at the voice of his mighty son.” Picture that Aboriginal warrior, whose name was Neecoma, calling the spirit of his father from the grey granite crest of Camboolgabann, and his father, Conora, responding to the voice of his son! To me there is quite as much poetry there as in the Ossianic episode.<sup>25</sup> (“Australian Christmases” 11)

Meston further romanticizes the heroism of Aborigines in inter-tribal disputes and in resisting colonization according to paradigms supplied from his classical reading, from imperialist representations of fictional Africans,<sup>26</sup> and occasionally from Australian national mythology. For example, in “The White Cassowary” published in 1888, which he affirms to be an authentic Aboriginal legend of the Barron River told to him by a tribal elder, he combines the motifs of lost love, legendary animals, warrior initiation, quests—a land circumnavigation of the continent is narrated—lost tribes, reincarnations and magical transformations. “The Cave Skeleton,” first published in 1893, attributes a lament for a dead white man written in the mode of Haggard’s Zulu songs to the aged Aboriginal fighter, Moonalba.<sup>27</sup> In 1919, Meston published “The Death-Song of the Murri,” a lament for the dying race claimed to be translated from “what stern old Wooralijee sang to me” (24). Writing shortly before his own death, he reapplied white Australian admiration for bushranger heroism to his recollection of the hanging of the defiant Aboriginal, Dimdahli, years before in Brisbane (“Back in the Fifties” 9).

These same romanticized and martial codes were reactivated in ideology in the poor jingoistic verses with which Meston encouraged participation in the Boer War and World War I.<sup>28</sup> In a late article, however, he remarked:

Man to man no civilised race would have any chance with the aboriginal in his old warrior days. The white man with only a sword or lance would have been an easy victim to the wild athlete with spear, boomerang and throwing nulla. ("Old Moreton Bay Tribes: Their Numbers" 19)

He goes on to insist that the victory of the European settlers was based on firearms alone. This is a point which again finds appropriate emphasis in recent historical reappraisals, but is rarely acknowledged in the writings of explorers and pioneers, who tend to confine heroic paradigms to their side of the racial divide.

Another aspect of inter-racial representation in Meston's writings, also connected with contemporary motifs of heroism and usually expressed from the perspective of his own acknowledged prowess as a boxer, hammer-thrower, runner and hunter, is his admiration for Aborigines as athletes. He typically superimposes European measures of sporting achievement onto Aborigines. For example, he describes his companion on a crocodile shooting adventure as "a Pascoe [River] black named Canora, a splendid specimen of a man, with a 46 inch chest and muscles that would make your average trained gymnasium athlete look like a soft plum barmaid" ("Series" 20–21). He notes that the world record for throwing a cricket ball is held by Yambeena, an Aboriginal from the Clermont district, and, gender bias aside, correctly predicts future track-and-field accomplishments: "There are hundreds of similar men among the North Australian blacks, only requiring proper training to astonish any team of white men in cricket or any other phase of athletics" ("Australian Aboriginal Cricketers" 11).

These positive, if unabashedly ethnocentric representations are further sustained by Meston's resort to the "noble savage" discourse, which takes a variety of belated forms in his writing. "Brigalow Billy," a story printed in the 1893 Christmas edition of the *North Queensland Register*, compares the lives of rational "free souled children of nature" with Europeans' constricted, debt-ridden and slavish existence (13). Meston developed the same theme in his draft for a book, sections of which were published posthumously by his son.<sup>29</sup> These depict a happy and healthy society in which men of hunting and fighting age, elders, women, and children harmoniously accede to their allocated roles and status. In his *Geographic History of Queensland* he quotes a series of first-contact reports by explorers which focus on the physical beauty and prowess of Aboriginal men and women (77). In old age, Meston romantically re-created the great corroborees in the Bunya mountains, which he learned of in his childhood,<sup>30</sup> and tribal life on the Brisbane River before settlement.<sup>31</sup> Elsewhere he contrasts Christianity to its disadvantage with Aboriginal religion,<sup>32</sup> and in an article protesting the senseless destruction of the North Queensland cedar forests, approves Aborigines' recognition of the cedar as sacred.<sup>33</sup> He demonstrates the wild tribes' innate sense of honour with a redemptive

tale set in Central Queensland in the bloodbath days of the 1850s and 1860s, in which an Irishman cares for three months for an eight-year-old Aboriginal boy, sent to test the white man's friendship. Later, when McMahon is leading his horse across a boggy creek while out searching for cattle, he is surrounded by armed warriors from Billie's tribe who offer him assistance: "All that was merely gratitude for his kindness to Billie, displayed at a time when probably no other white man on the Dawson would have escaped with his life [. . .]. Can the white race show anything finer than this?" ("Mestonian Flashes: Aboriginal Gratitude" 14). In sum, the standard Manichean association of Aborigines with darkness, in portrayals of them as dirty, wretched, and morally and intellectually degraded, is far less frequent in Meston's journalism—in contrast with his reports—than representations of them as shining with life, heroic, generous and athletic. In such representations tribesmen manifest the opposing Manichean associations with light and goodness which most writers reserved for the colonizers.

Meston's construction of Aboriginality is nevertheless hedged about with the common discourse of the "dying race," which takes an unusually specific form in his writings. In 1902, he confirmed Roth's estimate of numbers of North and Central Queensland Aborigines at two hundred thousand, but considered that "50 years will finish it" (*Bulletin* 12 July 1902: 16). Meston's unshakeable faith in the coming doom functioned in ideology to neutralize any physical or economic threat that the tribes might have posed to European hegemony. He created a safe zone in his writings, where the admiration exemplified above could flourish, further softened by a sentimental, but impotent regret. "The Race of Jindoobarrie," published in 1891, is an elegy for the extinct Bribie Island tribe:

Silent the songs when hearts were light,  
Gone are the dance, the hunt, the fight,  
In darkness of eternal night,  
Lost Jindoobarrie!<sup>34</sup> (607)

Near the end of his career, Meston expressed similar sentiments in both "The Death-Song of the Murri" and "The Last Corroboree," and described the end of the race as: "something too terrible to contemplate without endless tears, without immeasurable shame, without a silent horror too awful to express in words" ("Vanishing Aborigines"). The last sentence that he composed for publication—the conclusion to a natural history article dictated on his death bed—reads: "The scrub turkey is one of our best game birds, and will be one of the first to become extinct. His doom is inevitable as that of the Aboriginal" ("Scrub Turkeys" 11). Written by an expert marksman, who furthermore was prepared to admit in print his involvement in the accidental shooting of at least one Aboriginal, the implied equation extended a particularly disturbing colonial attitude into the twentieth

century.<sup>35</sup>

An aspect of Meston's cultural cringe as an autodidact and inhabitant of the remotest corner of the Empire is a superciliousness which presents Aborigines in a mock heroic style, as if the subject were too lowly to interest those classically educated. This tone emerges in contexts where humour was at a premium, such as the *Sydney Bulletin* and the Christmas editions of other papers. For example, writing as Maroogaline in his series "Land of the Crocodile" in the *Bulletin*, he mentions meeting at Port Douglas in 1885 the skipper of a cutter who, "owned an 18-year-old daughter of the forest, a dark-skinned maiden of the Mossman tribe" (5 Sept. 1885: 24). He sometimes subscribes to the colonial discourse which ridiculed supposed mistakes of Aborigines in early contact with Europeans, in tales for instance of tribesmen terrified by glass eyes (26 Dec. 1885: 17) or camels (31 Oct. 1891: 21). Conversely, his humour occasionally privileges the Aboriginal perspective, for example in an allusion to "an old blackfellow on the Annan River," who believed that cattle ticks were sent by the souls of murdered Aborigines to punish bad squatters: "I suggested that this was hardly fair to the good squatters, but he said he had only seen two, and they were dead." (27 Feb. 1887: 27). Occasionally Meston satirizes the inhumane practice of collecting for study the heads of non-European races. A *Bulletin* anecdote tells how a Russian scientist visited Brisbane jail to observe the hangings of a Chinese and an Aboriginal man. Later the scientist "decapitated the dead Celestial [. . .] with as much compunction as is usually displayed by a myall when cutting the head off a wallaby" (9 Dec. 1885: 9). This statement exemplifies the swerves into conventional disparagement which are another feature of Meston's journalistic treatment of Aborigines.<sup>36</sup>

Meston's carefully constructed status as an expert and spokesman was exploitative, in that it brought him into prominence and provided him with an income. His sensationalist tales of hardships and of hazards such as cannibalism belong to the tenacious genre of pioneering reminiscences, but retreat from this genre to the degree that they encompass Aboriginal perspectives.<sup>37</sup> His work intermittently colludes with and challenges the hostile Manichean insistence typical of such writing, that the tribes were evil, the unknown, dark and threatening. For example, a late article recalls how in 1864 a station manager, Robert Mackie, escaped death by leaving his bed seconds before it was pierced by a spear, but proceeds to record Meston's discovery at Cape Cleveland in 1881 of cast-iron four-pounder cannon balls, "assumed to have been fired by some passing vessel, whose people regarded all aboriginals as legitimate targets" ("Bits of History").

The exploitative showmanship of Meston's journalism is paralleled by his non-literary activities. He lectured on his Bellenden Ker expeditions with "a black in full war paint standing on either side of him," (Gall) and in 1892 illustrated a talk to the Royal Society of Queensland by displaying his "fine collection" of

Aboriginal weapons and artefacts (“Secretary of the Society’s Report”). In 1896, he marshalled a “guard of honour” of twenty-four Aborigines, again in so-called war paint, to welcome the Queensland Governor, Lord Lamington, to Brisbane. In the same year, he advertized in the *Cairns Post*: “Tragedies and Comedies of the Early Days: Wild Life in Queensland,” a series of lectures illustrated by lantern slides, front seats 2 shillings, back seats 1 shilling (6 and 13 Aug. 1896). In 1901, Meston and his son Harold mounted “Day and Night” displays at Kurnell of Aboriginal weapons skills, in which lighted boomerangs were thrown. The *Sydney Morning Herald* commented favourably that Meston “has gained the respect of the men by the manner in which he emulates them in spear, boomerang or nullah throwing,” (10 Jan. 1901) but the *Bulletin* report was scathing (Evans, Saunders and Cronin 353). In December 1904, his collection of Aboriginal weapons and artifacts went on sale in Brisbane.<sup>38</sup>

The balanced or conflicting discourses traced in Meston’s journalism attain a brief plateau of certainty in occasional forthright affirmations in favour of land rights and against colonial theft:

In Australia there have been no treaties, and no terms with the aboriginals, from the landing of Governor Philip to the present time. No compensation whatever has been given to them for lands occupied and game destroyed. Their exclusive right to any land or game has never even been recognised. They have been treated as trespassers, instead of the original owners of the soil—a race whose title deeds of occupation were old when Britain was occupied by tribes of painted cannibals and the modern British race had neither a habitation nor a name. Their sacred rights have not been recognised, because they were too disunited and too weak to enforce recognition. (“Mestonian Flashes: Australian Aboriginals” 31)

Passing over the closing swerve to racial disparagement, the same article proceeds to document official British condemnations of settlers’ treatment of Aborigines, thereby implying a contrast later explicated by Henry Reynolds (*Why Weren’t We Told?* 208–14; *An Indelible Stain?* 56–59). Meston further foreshadows professional reappraisals when, in reporting the Bellenden Ker expedition of 1889, he declares:

In the debtor and creditor account of murder and outrage the balance is decidedly against the white man. Every white man murdered by blacks is represented by at least fifty blacks murdered by white men. The white man has, beyond all question, been the most unscrupulous and deliberate murderer of the two. (“Report on the Government Scientific Expedition” 9)

In newspapers he denounces unprovoked aggression against Aborigines by explorers such as Flinders,<sup>39</sup> with the result that his writing incorporates a clash between the standardized contemporary adulation, and his recognition that explorers' behaviour towards the tribes was often as brutal as it was unwise.<sup>40</sup> An example of this conflict is his friendship for the bloodstained overlander, Frank Jardine,<sup>41</sup> who had the advantage of being a fellow Scot, and his unrelieved personal enmity towards the admittedly more calculating murderer, Christie Palmerston.<sup>42</sup> He again accords with present views when, writing as Maroogaline in the *Bulletin*, he relishes the irony of M'Douall Stuart's words at the hoisting of the Union Jack on Central Mount Stuart: "may it be a sign to the natives that the dawn of liberty, civilisation and Christianity is about to break upon them!" ("Land of the Crocodile," 8 May 1895: 23).

Whatever his personal involvement in such incidents may have been, Meston similarly deplures, for the edification of his readers, the random shootings of Aborigines after settlement,<sup>43</sup> and the mass killings and woundings dissembled under the euphemism "dispersal."<sup>44</sup> His willingness to transpose feelings across the racial divide is unusual, and he understands that Aborigines acted, like whites, from a desire for retributive justice.<sup>45</sup> Meston's account of the massacre in 1861 of the Wills family on the Nogoa River in Central Queensland exemplifies his recognition of a common humanity. After narrating the strategy by which the tribesmen overcame superior fire power, he comments:

As usual, the white man gave his version of what he considered "a brutal, treacherous, cowardly, unprovoked attack by the blacks!" It was nothing of the kind, but merely the old Hebrew law of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, or the old Scottish clan system [. . .]. In revenge of the killing of Wills and his party, the white men retaliated by shooting scores of blacks, men, women and children, who were perfectly innocent. Why blame the aboriginal, unless you claim that while the white man has every right to be a devil, all the aboriginals are expected to be angels? ("Tragedy" 21)

His recollection of a "Wild New Year's Night in North Australia," when festive whites and Aborigines corroboreed together, inspires him to dream of an end to racial conflict:

Carlyle says that "all war is a misunderstanding, and instead of understanding each other we [. . .] go to war merely for a difference in our uniforms, and not in ourselves." On that joyous New Year's Day we all understood each other, and were as happy as a band of children. (19)

The initial consideration of Archibald Meston's half-century of literary journalism undertaken in this essay has thus revealed a mixture of exploitative and benevolent motives and an interweaving of racial discourses, many of which were standard for the period. Liberal elements, embodying attitudes uncommon before the late twentieth century, include Meston's recognition of Aborigines' rights to the land, his conviction that indigenous culture was truly ancient, his perception of the gulf between theoretical British compassion for the tribes and the pragmatic destruction wrought by settlers, and his insistence that the latter owed their ascendancy to firearms. His repeated assertion that Aborigines attacked settlers in self-defence and out of a desire for justice was as rare in the period as his recognition of a shared humanity and his ability to transpose feelings across the racial divide. The romantic paradigms gifted to Meston by his Scottish and Anglo-Australian heritage, and expanded by his wide private reading in ancient history, the classics, and such authors as Macpherson, Byron, and Haggard, nevertheless prevented him from mediating anything approaching an authentic knowledge to the public. While it might be argued that these same paradigms permitted him to disseminate a noble, heroic and harmonious version of pre-contact Aboriginal society, with the capacity to soften white racial attitudes, these positives were insulated from any notion of Aboriginal self-determination by his repeated resort to the "doomed race" theory.

Beyond its complex construction of Aboriginality, Meston's writing for the press comprised many rich cultural layers, including the constitution of the author's persona, his masculinist assumptions, his promotion of Queensland, the paradox of his natural history and shooting articles, his deployment of sources, and the generic dissemination of his views through rhetoric, poetry and fiction. Deeper penetration of these layers might enhance understanding of the discursive operations of power in Australia during a crucial developmental phase.

## Endnotes

1. Meston later claimed that the Protection Act itself "was drafted by myself and W. E. Parry Okeden, Commissioner of Police" (*Sydney Morning Herald* 8 Apr. 1922) and the proposals in his Reports do seem to have been modified in accordance with the "strong punitive rhetoric" of W. E. Parry-Okeden's official response in his "Report of Police Commissioner to the Home Secretary," dated 19 Feb. 1897 (Ganter and Kidd 538–41). The Act became the model for similar legislation subsequently passed in Western Australia, the Northern Territory and South Australia (Thorpe 52).
2. "The aboriginals and aboriginal questions were always on his mind," remarked W.T. Gall in "Meston: The Man and His Work" *Daily Mail* 5 Apr. 1924. Meston's sustained publication of poetry suggests that he continued to cherish literary aspirations. His earliest poem, "The Drowned One," was published

- in the *Queenslander* 24 Dec. 1870: 8; his latest, "Cameelda Leeaneena," appeared in the *Bulletin* 30 Mar. 1922: 3.
3. Described in "Wild Country and Wild Tribes: A Tour in North Queensland," a series of fifteen articles which Meston published in the *Queenslander* from 9 January to 17 April 1897; and in "Mestonian Flashes," in *Cummins and Campbell's Monthly Magazine* April 1955: 13–14, 29.
  4. "Mr Meston has read much and observed much; he has united, as an observer, exceptional talent to exceptional opportunity; and his book does credit to his industry in compilation and his perseverance in original research [. . .]. The book is unique, and every Australian should get it and read it [. . .]. No other man could have written it; its facts are little known, and most have never been brought together" (*Bulletin* 6 Apr. 1895); "Not a dry record of facts, but attractively written, with facts embedded" (*Chronicle*, [Maryborough] 6 Apr. 1895); "It need not be said that anything from Mr. Meston's pen can be otherwise than interesting and informing" (*Wide Bay and Burnett News* 9 Apr. 1895); "The book is a strange mixture of dry facts and eloquence [. . .] a perfect mine of information." (*Worker* 13 Apr. 1895); "The man who wrote this book knows how to write, because he has taken a drydust subject and breathed into it the breath of life; he has made it so truly alive that you can feel its warmth and be comforted [. . .]. There are not many Mestons. Perhaps he is unique; his book is!" (Unsources cutting, Oxley Library, OM 64–17/17).
  5. For example, Browne 10–11, 273–75; paragraph by "El. V." *Bulletin* 7 Aug. 1935: 45; Hugh Borland, "March of the Years: 1848–1948." *Cairns Post* 10 Mar. 1948: 5.
  6. For example, Rowley 177–83; Evans, Saunders and Cronin 5, 50–51, 86–87, 95–97, 102–09, 112–13; Fitzgerald 210, 217–18; Loos, *Invasion and Resistance* 172–77 and "A Chapter of Contact" 21–24; Thorpe 53–67; Reynolds, "Townsppeople" 148, 152; Ganter and Kidd 537–49. Histories sometimes resort to Meston as a reliable observer, and even as an "ardent spokesman for the Aboriginal cause," while condemning his actions (see for example, Evans, Saunders and Cronin 86; 346–47).
  7. Other Meston articles republished posthumously were: Harry C. Perry, "Wild Days in the Far North: Mestonian Memories: A Funeral Pyre on Dunk Island," *The Steering Wheel and Society and Home* 1 July 1935: 56–58; and "Yooko Beanee (The Fire Death): A Tale of the Palmer Goldfield," *The Steering Wheel and Society and Home* 1 Oct. 1935: 53–55. Meston's poem, "Alweera and Galmindia," first published in *Steele Rudd's Magazine* 1904, was republished in 1959 by Stable and Kirkwood (57).
  8. Even before the Protection Act was passed, vitriolic editorials appeared in the *Townsville Evening Star*, one of which, headed "Unadulterated Utopianism," protests: "Of late Mr. Meston has been working up the black business for all he was worth, and he has been clever enough to induce the Government to

- practically give him a free hand to civilise the lazy brainless nigger and to educate him in all the Christian virtues” (8 Mar. 1897: 3; cf. 23 Mar. 1897: 3). A heavily ironic comment, again targeting Meston and Aborigines together, appeared in the *North Queensland Register* 19 May 1897: 3. Attitudes of Maryborough residents to Meston’s experiment at White Cliffs Reserve on Fraser Island were similar (Evans and Walker 80–81).
9. From 1842 to 1847, under the command of Captain Blackwood, the H.M.S. *Fly* surveyed the Barrier Reef, Torres Strait and parts of New Guinea. The narrative of the voyage, published by the naturalist on board, J. Beete Jukes, contains a vivid description of Bayley’s spearing (Vol. 1, 105–14).
  10. “The Cave Skeleton.” *North Queensland Register* 25 Dec. 1893, republished in *LiNQ* 9.3 (1981): 23–30; “In the Far North: Tragedies of the Barrier,” *Sydney Mail* 27 July 1921: 12. In May 1848, an expedition led by Edmund Kennedy set out from Rockingham Bay, intending to penetrate the previously unexplored territory northwards to the tip of Cape York. Exhausted, short of food, and harassed by hostile tribes, Kennedy was forced to leave eight members of his expedition in a camp at Weymouth Bay, with the intention of later rescuing them by sea. On the continued northerly route, however, Kennedy himself and all the remaining members of his party, except for an Aboriginal, Jackey Jackey, perished. When Jackey Jackey finally guided the rescue ship into Weymouth Bay, only two men remained alive.
  11. Meston’s article, “Aboriginal Names” (*Bulletin* 18 Apr. 1896: 27) reveals his defensive attitude to formal academic study. He writes with the object of “fix[ing] beyond dispute” the origins of a few well known Aboriginal words, in advance of research proposed by Prof. Morris of Melbourne University, who “as a matter of course will drift into the usual grotesque blunders incidental to information collected promiscuously from miscellaneous sources.” In a later article, Meston affirmed that twelve-year-old Aboriginal boys possess an astonishing knowledge of Australian fauna and flora. By contrast, “Even University professors would clearly realise how little they know of the bush” (“Mestonian Flashes,” *Cummins and Campbell’s Monthly Magazine* Apr. 1955: 29).
  12. Meston, whose Rosewood constituency was made up mostly of Germans, confronted Morehead, MLA for Mitchell, who opposed further German immigration. Meston argued that the English themselves were not of pure descent, unlike the Chinese and the Egyptians, who “were the same race who built the pyramids, worshipped Isis and Horus, who fed the sacred crocodiles and embalmed the sacred ibis.” Morehead later told Meston that he believed he was a reincarnated sacred ibis (Gall, “Meston: The Man and His Work”).
  13. The *North Queensland Register* referred to Meston as “the well-known ethnologist” (5 Dec. 1904: 21).
  14. Meston remarked, “At the time I spoke the ‘Yoocum-Yoocum’ dialect which extended from the Logan River south to midway between the Clarence and

- Bellinger and all New England from Armidale to near Warwick” (“Old Moreton Bay Tribes: Their Languages”). Thorpe discusses the evidence for Meston’s knowledge of Aboriginal dialects (55–56).
15. Meston said he “took the opportunity of a two months’ sojourn with [the Pascoe River tribe] to take down an extensive vocabulary” (“In the Far North”).
  16. See for example, “Report by A. Meston on the Government Scientific Expedition to the Bellenden-Ker Range (Wooroonooran), North Queensland,” Queensland Legislative Assembly *Votes and Proceedings* Vol. 4 (1889): 10. Articles in Meston’s late series, “Old Moreton Bay Tribes,” list distinguishing features of south-east Queensland and northern New South Wales dialects (*Brisbane Courier* 28 July 1923: 19; 25 Aug. 1923: 19; 20 Oct. 1923: 18; and 1 Dec. 1923: 19).
  17. For example, *Ethnological Studies among the North-West-Central Aborigines with 438 Illustrations* and Roth’s eighteen Bulletins on *North Queensland Ethnography*, published between 1901 and 1910 as Records of the Australian Museum. His hand-written notes on Cape York tribes, compiled for the Queensland Government c. 1900 while resident in Cooktown as Northern Protector, are careful and highly detailed.
  18. For example, Meston’s articles, “The Fauna of Wooroonooran” (*Queenslander* 7 Dec. 1889: 1080 and 21 Dec. 1889: 1174), publicize the tribal name of Bellenden Ker. In “Beautiful Names” (*Queenslander* 11 Oct. 1890: 692), he poeticized Queensland Aboriginal names in sixteen verses.
  19. Similarly, Meston wrote: “They were probably there far beyond the time of the Pyramid-builders, and hunting and fishing and dancing corroborees before Tyre and Sidon, Thebes, Memphis, Babylon, Nineveh and Persepolis came on the horizon of human history” (“In the Far North”).
  20. For example, “Wild Country and Wild Tribes XI. A Tour in North Queensland,” *Queenslander* 20 Mar. 1897: 634; *Bulletin* 12 July 1902: 16; “Creed of the Aboriginal, ‘Coorahwee–Meewye–Murri.’” *Daily Mail* 24 Apr. 1921: 17. A detailed account of a bora ceremony was published in “Mestonian Flashes. Australian Aborigines,” *Cummins and Campbell’s Monthly Magazine* Nov. 1954: 34; Dec. 1954: 13, 29.
  21. For example, “The Batavia blacks, like all the other tribes in the Cape York Peninsula, use no boomerang, no shield and no nulla [. . .]. In place of the shield they use the woomera to parry a spear, and their dexterity is truly astonishing. They have the eyes of eagles and their movements are those of a cat. The light woomera spear travels with lightning rapidity, and yet they will ‘cut it off’ or parry it when a foot from the body” (“Wild Country and Wild Tribes III: A Tour in North Queensland,” *Queenslander* 23 Jan. 1897: 185). Similar passages occur in “Something Aboriginal,” *Bulletin* 16 Aug. 1902: 31; “Old Moreton Bay Tribes: Their Numbers, Weapons and Dialects” 19.
  22. “The Moreton Bay Tribes: Their Hunting and Fishing,” *Brisbane Courier* 5 Jan. 1924: 18.

23. "Black Trackers," *Lone Hand* 1 Apr. 1908: 664–65. A typescript, "Lost in the Bush," (Oxley Library, OM 64–17, Box 1) narrates the tracking of a boy, Charles Parker of Lauderdale Station near Pentland, by Aborigines who live up to the highest of settlers' expectations.
24. "Customs of Australian Aborigines: The Message Stick: Sturt's Terrible Rite," *Antipodean* Christmas 1897: 97–100, 101.
25. Meston's references are to James Macpherson's *Fingal* (1762), a fabrication purporting to be a prose translation of an epic by Ossian, a third-century Gaelic poet, who narrates heroic deeds performed by his father, Fingal, and his great grandfather, Trenmor.
26. Meston's poem, "A Word for the Zulus," (*Queenslander* 3 Feb. 1894: 209) sympathetically revisits the history of the Zulu king, Chaka, fictionalized in Haggard's *Nada the Lily*, first published in 1892.
27. See note 10, above.
28. See for example, "To the Australian Troops," *Queenslander* 4 Nov. 1899: 901; and "The Day of Ragnarock," *Bulletin* 30 Sept. 1915: 40.
29. "Mestonian Flashes: Australian Aborigines." *Cummins and Campbell's Monthly Magazine* Nov. 1954: 13–14.
30. "For thousands, or tens of thousands of years, or some immeasurable period of time, the wild men and women gathered at the triennial feast on the Bunya mountains, a period when all hostilities were suspended, and all the invited tribes met there on amicable terms, and spent a joyous time in feasting, and sham fights, and corroborees and athletic feats, until the time came for the farewell corroboree and the homeward march [. . .] for I clearly remember, since a boy, the blacks of the Clarence returning from the Bunya feast, bringing long black brigalow spears, 'bonoorong,' they got from the blacks of Darundur, either as presents or by barter," ("The Bunya Feast: Mobilan's Former Glory," *Brisbane Courier* 6 Oct. 1923: 18).
31. "Everywhere, joyous, wild, free life, man and beast, and bird and tree, in primeval innocence. Man himself in the midst of peace and plenty, free from any sort of toil, and radiant with the physical health and vigour which make the mere daily life a perennial source of joy" ("Black Man to White Settlement" 9).
32. "Creed of the Aboriginal: 'Coorahwee–Meewye–Murri,'" *Daily Mail* 24 Apr. 1921: 16–17.
33. "The Tragedy of Cedar," *Bulletin* 14 Aug. 1919: 40.
34. "The Race of Jindoobarrie" was parodied in a *Boomerang* cartoon (Evans and Walker 60), while a satiric reply poem in the *Queenslander* (14 Nov. 1891: 941) targeted Meston's romantic language.
35. In "Wild Men and Wild Scenes," printed in the *World's News* on 23 Feb. 1924, and set on the "wild romantic coast" of Cape York, Meston establishes his personal good intentions in a context of murders casually committed by other Europeans. He then offers what was to prove almost a deathbed

- confession. Thorpe notes that “Meston had something of a reputation for killing Aborigines by the 1880s,” and documents a Brisbane politician’s claim that Meston had boasted more than once of “the number of blacks who had fallen to his rifle” (62).
36. Meston again satirizes skull collecting when he ends an article on indigenous Tasmanians by remarking that “Truganina (pronounced Trooganeena) returned and died in her native land. Her skull is now on view at Hobart Museum” (“Land of the Crocodile,” *Bulletin* 7 Sept. 1895: 28).
  37. In “Entertained by Cannibals,” Meston remarks: “In over fifty years it has been my lot to see only seven cases of cannibalism, and all, with two exceptions, were in the far north” (*World’s News* 8 Mar. 1924: 11). In “Dramatic and Tragic Scenes in North Queensland,” Meston recalls how he shared a turtle he had shot with a group of Aborigines on the Russell River, soon after they had killed and eaten a woman from another tribe: “On my arrival at the scene [. . .] there was nothing left except one arm and the left leg from below the knee” (*World’s News* 18 Nov. 1922: 20). Further episodes are reported in “Memories of the Late Archibald Meston. Cannibals and Cannibalism.” *Cummins and Campbell’s Monthly Magazine* Dec. 1936: 73, 75.
  38. *Bulletin* 17 Nov. 1904: 19; *North Queensland Register* 5 Dec. 1904: 21.
  39. “Bribie Island,” *Queenslander* 26 Sept. 1891: 607; “Matthew Flinders: Earliest Caller: Visit to Queensland,” *Daily Mail* 29 Sept. 1923: 8.
  40. “In the noble band of Australian explorers there is not one whose memory is stained by any action dishonourable to himself or discreditable to the nation” (Meston, “Lost Leichhardt,” *Queenslander* Christmas Supplement 20 Dec. 1890: 11). Meston’s poem, “Historic and Prehistoric Australia,” concludes: “Honor then the old explorers, honor to each stainless name/ That Australia proudly places in the highest niche of fame” (*Bulletin* 18 Aug. 1921: 47). Meston admires Hodgkinson for accomplishing his work “without the loss of a man or a conflict with the natives” (“Hodgkinson as an Explorer,” *Queenslander* 1 Sept. 1900: 484; see further “Untrodden Paths: Our Explorers: Queensland’s Great Work,” *Johnstone River Advocate* 29 Oct. 1923). Meston writes similarly of Mitchell’s northern expedition: “It was [. . .] most honourably distinguished by unbroken friendship with the aboriginals,” (“Memories of the Late Archibald Meston: Out with the Explorers: Sir Thomas Mitchell,” *Cummins and Campbell’s Monthly Magazine* Oct. 1936: 34).
  41. “They were a fine old Scottish border family those Jardines, and the three sons, who were all well known to me for many years, were well educated, hardy athletes, thorough bushmen, polite and courteous, as gentlemen always are, and genuine men in every sense of the word” (Meston, “Untrodden Paths: Our Explorers: The Jardines: Overland to Somerset,” *Daily Mail* 5 Nov. 1923). “The explorers [Frank and Alick Jardine] had either to kill or be killed,” (Meston, “In the Far North II: Voices of the Barrier Reef,” *Sydney Mail* 3 Aug. 1921: 12). In “Tragedy of Moorlug Island,” Meston narrates Frank Jardine’s

- leadership of a party of whites who avenged the killing and eating of Dutch seamen by Torres Straits islanders (*World's News* 18 Mar. 1922: 10). He mentions that he visited Jardine at Somerset in 1895 ("New Guinea's Worst Tragedy: Eighteen Men Murdered and Eaten," *World's News* 6 Oct. 1923: 11.)
42. Meston describes how Palmerston came upon a large group of Aborigines fishing with spears and line. "How many blacks died there on that occasion has not been accurately recorded. It is enough here to know that in its birthday Port Douglas was bathed in blood, and that those white rocks were barred by red stains from the life stream of natives whose forefathers had fished there for unknown thousands of years" (*World's News* 1 July 1922). Meston developed a personal animosity towards Palmerston in the 1880s, over the surveying and allocation of the northern inland railway route. "Palmerston had no qualification whatsoever [. . .]. So Palmerston's report went into the waste paper basket," (Meston, "Cairns-Herberton Railway History," *Johnstone River Advocate* 4 July 1923).
  43. "Chapter of Close Calls" describes how whites killed three Aborigines of a group who welcomed a whale-boat into Princess Charlotte Bay with overtures of friendship (*World's News* 6 May 1922: 17). Meston comments: "The first white men who came into that locality would be held responsible for the act of those cowardly scoundrels, whose identity I could never discover." Similarly, "A Northern Christmas Eve An Exciting Night," condemns a "scoundrel" who shot three Aborigines who failed to deliver on news of a goldmine (*World's News* 3 Nov. 1923: 11).
  44. Concerning squatters' claiming of the Port Curtis district, Meston wrote: "As usual in other parts of Australia, the original owner of the soil was ignored by the new proprietor. His tribal laws, his customs, game preserves, and social regulations were treated with heartless contempt. Passing to windward of a mob of cattle or killing half a dozen of the sheep that ate his kangaroo pastures was sufficient excuse for the squatter to drive the tribe back to the ranges or shoot a score of men, women and children in cold blood," ("A Christmas Tragedy," *Queenslander* Christmas Supplement 15 Dec. 1900: 2).
  45. Meston also empathizes with a betrayed Aboriginal woman ("Land of the Crocodile," *Bulletin* 19 Feb. 1898: 32); and with the grieving Aboriginal parents of two albino girls, stolen because they were thought by settlers to be white ("Land of the Crocodile," 5 Mar. 1898: 31).

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