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**Archives, Cultural Sensitivity
and Copyright: The Publishing of
*Letters from Aboriginal Women of
Victoria 1867–1926***

Correspondence from Aboriginal women in Victoria to the authorities who directed their lives, from the late-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century, is filed in the Board for the Protection of Aborigines (BPA) archives, held jointly in the Victorian Archives Centre by the Public Record Office of Victoria (PROV) and the National Archives of Australia (NAA). These articulate and broad-ranging letters, written by women educated on missions and reserves, form part of a collection that provides nuance and detail for an era of white invasion, dispossession and control. The correspondence belies what might easily be assumed to be an almost total silence of Aboriginal women's voices from this period, an assumption that persists because the letters have been referenced only

sparingly, and even then mainly in the context of political protest only.¹ The publication in 2002 of a selection of these letters in the collected volume *Letters from Aboriginal Women of Victoria 1867–1926*, edited by Elizabeth Nelson, Sandra Smith and Patricia Grimshaw, sought to address this neglect and to broaden the scope of their relevance.² However, the editing, annotating and contextualising of the letters proved complex and was affected by issues of cultural sensitivity, copyright and the publication process itself. The book has been out of print for over a decade and copies are now difficult to find.³ It is rarely cited by other historians working in this field.⁴ Yet this accessible and well-structured

¹ Anita Heiss and Peter Minter have noted it was transactions with colonial administrators that formed the basis of early Indigenous literature written in English: ‘a tool of negotiation in which Aboriginal voices could be heard in a form recognisable to British authority’. Anita Heiss and Peter Minter, ‘Introduction’, *Macquarie PEN Anthology of Aboriginal Literature*, eds Heiss and Minter (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2008), 2. See also Jessica Horton’s analysis of Aboriginal women’s letters as a form of politics, ‘Rewriting Political History: Letters from Aboriginal People in Victoria, 1886–1919’, *History Australia* 9(2), 2012, 157–80.

² *Letters from Aboriginal Women of Victoria 1867–1926*, eds Elizabeth Nelson, Sandra Smith and Patricia Grimshaw (Melbourne: University of Melbourne, 2002); hereafter *Letters*. The editors used the term ‘Aborigines’ rather than ‘Indigenous’, ‘Kooris’ or ‘Koories’ in response to the preference then expressed by local communities in Victoria.

³ In my own research, I found a copy of the book by accident in Monash University’s Matheson Library when I was searching for something else. None are held in the local history collections of regional libraries in Gippsland, Victoria, one of the home country areas from which the letters flowed.

⁴ There is no mention, for example, of *Letters* in Richard Broome, *Aboriginal Victorians: A History Since 1800* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2005), or in Bain Attwood, *Telling the Truth About Aboriginal History* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2005), or in Broome’s fully revised *Aboriginal Australians: A History Since 1788* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2010).

collection offers a way into an extensive and problematic archive, providing further depth and adding private voices to Indigenous Australian histories. *Letters* was a book ahead of its time in scope and in its emphasis on collaboration. It is deserving of republication and proper acknowledgement.

Letters are unique and sensitive historical artefacts, and should be valued for what they are as well as what they contain. In published collections, they acquire a coherent narrative structure that emphasises the writer's voice as much as the content of the letter. Having edited a collection myself, I am mindful of the need to remain true to the original material while also rendering it accessible for the reader.⁵ This collection makes a valuable contribution to a complex and confronting period in Australian history, alongside explorers' and squatters' diaries and letters, missionaries' papers, the writings of ethnographers, and records from colonial and federal government bodies and parliamentary enquiries. These letters, in their eloquence and persistence, are an important Indigenous record in a largely European archive. They reveal resourcefulness, resilience, tenacity and emotional strength in these women's negotiations from an unequal position with white (male) authorities. The women, variously, sent letters to the Chief Secretary, to missionaries and station managers, local guardians, family members, newspaper editors, police, Members of Parliament, and the Governor of Victoria.⁶ The period covered by the letters

⁵ See my article 'Editorial Practice and Epistolarity: Silent and Not So Silent', *Script & Print* (forthcoming, 2015).

⁶ Nelson et al, *Letters*, 19.

crosses key dates, including the establishment in the colony of Victoria of the Board for the Protection of Aborigines and the passing of the *Aboriginal Protection Act* in 1869,⁷ the *Aborigines' Protection Act* in 1886 (which stipulated, with some exceptions, that those between the ages of fifteen and thirty-five deemed to be 'half-castes' had to leave missions and reserves)⁸ and Federation in 1901, as a result of which Aboriginal people were excluded from the Australian Constitution that came into force on 1 January of that year.⁹

Editors Elizabeth Nelson, Sandra Smith and Patricia Grimshaw produced a carefully mediated collection of personal narratives within a social, historical and political context. *Letters* is by no means merely a collection of selected

⁷ This Act, for 'the protection and management of the Aboriginal natives', restricted their place of residence, possessions, earnings, employment, care, custody and the education of children, as well as interaction with non-Aboriginal people. *Act to provide for the Protection and Management of the Aboriginal Natives of Victoria, 11 November 1869 (Vic.)*, Parliament of Victoria, No. 349.

⁸ This Act initiated a policy of removing those of mixed descent from the reserve system, with the intention of reducing numbers on the reserves so that they might eventually be closed down. The Act impacted more on men than women as it excluded female 'half-castes' married to Aboriginals and children of an Aboriginal, however it resulted in the separation of communities and family members, causing great distress. *Act to amend an Act intituled An Act to provide for the Protection and Management of the Aboriginal Natives of Victoria, 16 December 1886 (Vic.)*, Parliament of Victoria, No. 912.

⁹ The 'people' referred to in the Constitution did not include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Specifically, Section 127 stated: 'In reckoning the numbers of people of the Commonwealth, or of a State or other part of the Commonwealth, aboriginal natives shall not be counted'.

documents.¹⁰ Further, the decision by the editors to publish these women's letters, rather than writing an interpretive study of the correspondence, displayed a commitment to the Indigenous communities concerned and an acknowledgement of their ownership of the letters as family records, not simply source material. Such a collaborative approach to archival material, at that time, sets *Letters* apart from the publications of revisionist historians, many of whom were engaged in the Australian History Wars – a continuing and frequently acrimonious exchange concerning the history of frontier contact, colonialism and race relations, dominated by non-Indigenous historians,¹¹ which extended well beyond the academy and into the political arena.¹²

Nelson, Smith and Grimshaw ensured that family privacy, as well as family copyrights, were respected – presaging the methodology that is now prescribed under what Maxine Briggs, Koori Liaison Officer at the State Library of Victoria,

¹⁰ Patricia Grimshaw, email message to author, 7 March 2009. *Letters* was dismissed by potential reviewers as being a collection of selected documents rather than a work of 'sustained historical interpretation'.

¹¹ For a discussion of 'a new genre of history writing which features agreements, instances of cooperation and solidarity and intimate interactions between Aboriginal people and colonisers', see Clare Land and Eve Vincent, 'Silenced Voices [Absence of Indigenous Voices from the 'History Wars']', *Arena* 67, October–November 2003, 19–21.

¹² There is a voluminous scholarship on the History Wars: books, journal articles and opinion pieces. Key texts include Henry Reynolds, *Why Weren't We Told? A Personal Search for the Truth About Our History* (Melbourne: Viking Penguin, 1999); Keith Windschuttle, *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History, Volume One: Van Diemen's Land 1803-1847* (Sydney: Macleay Press, 2002); Stuart Macintyre and Anna Clark, *The History Wars* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2003); Attwood, *Telling the Truth About Aboriginal History*.

refers to as ‘the invisible net of protocol’.¹³ This ‘net’ has for many years been applied to Indigenous images, oral histories and life stories – in other words, media that ‘hold an immediacy of representation, for instance, representation of place, of ceremony, of knowledge ... material that raises quite intense questions of authorship and ownership’, as well as access and control.¹⁴ The ‘invisible net’ now extends to archival documents, affecting the manner in which they may be accessed and subsequently used, and by whom. In 2010, this was formalised in the PROV Cultural Sensitivity Statement that was applied to all materials held in the BPA archives and in the PROV generally that concern Indigenous communities. This has had a number of consequences that affect access to the letters both by scholarly researchers and those with a more general interest. For example, one effect of the Statement is that these women’s letters have not been digitised. They may be read in their original form only in the reading room at the PROV, and their use is restricted as follows:

It is a condition of use of any records relating to Aboriginal people in the custody of Public Record Office Victoria (PROV) that researchers

¹³ Maxine Briggs, ‘Indigenous Protocols’ (presentation at the La Trobe University symposium Writing and Teaching Aboriginal History, Melbourne, 20 February 2014).

¹⁴ Jane Anderson, ‘Indigenous Knowledge, Intellectual Property, Libraries and Archives: Crises of Access, Control and Future Utility’ in *Australian Indigenous Knowledge and Libraries*, eds Martin Nakata and Marcia Langton, (Canberra: Australian Academic & Research Libraries, 2005), 86–7. See also Terri Janke, ‘Managing Indigenous Knowledge and Indigenous Cultural Property’ in the same publication, 99–112.

ensure that any disclosure of information contained in these records is consistent with the views and sensitivities of relevant Aboriginal individuals and communities. It is the responsibility of researchers to ensure that these views and sensitivities are sought, understood and applied appropriately.¹⁵

The editors of *Letters* imposed such guidelines on their work a decade before there was a formal requirement for them to do so.

Smith, who was the coordinator of the Aboriginal Family History Project at Museum Victoria at the time the collection was published, took overall responsibility for decisions on the content and presentation of the letters to be included. She was influenced by her understanding that many of these letters involved requests to authorities that few, if any, white women of the time would have been called upon to make: requests for clothing, food and accommodation, requests for travel passes and, perhaps most heartbreaking of all, requests to have children returned. In the process of meeting with Indigenous communities to discuss the project, Smith was also made aware that these letters were often being read for the first time by descendants of the correspondents. This experience in itself was confronting for some descendants who had no wish to have their family members exposed through the letters in any way that might be considered humiliating. References to particularly sensitive topics such as alcoholism,

¹⁵ Public Records Office of Victoria Cultural Sensitivity Statement.

family violence and adultery were removed from the published version of many of the letters.¹⁶ Minor changes were also made to correct some, but not all, of the grammar, spelling and punctuation ‘where this is useful to facilitate the reader’s understanding’.¹⁷

Several practical barriers to publication were encountered, beginning with copyright constraints, which adhere for seventy years from first publication or from the death of the creator, thus restricting the editors to the period before 1927. Further, they were allowed up to a maximum of 200 words per letter writer, and permission was required both from descendants of the letter writers as well as from the PROV. The full names of the selected letter writers were listed in the Commonwealth of Australia *Gazette* for a period of twelve months with the intention of making the proposed publication known to descendants. Smith traced these families through her close contacts with Indigenous communities, and she also researched and wrote brief biographies of the correspondents, including details of place of residence, and of births, deaths, marriages and extended family networks. The approach followed on from the work of anthropologist and historian Diane Barwick, whose research into the Indigenous communities at Coranderrk reserve, published posthumously in 1998, also focused on family networks and the relationships within and beyond these groupings; as well as engaging in archival research, Barwick worked closely with

¹⁶ Patricia Grimshaw and Elizabeth Nelson, interview with the author, 5 March 2014.

¹⁷ Nelson et al, *Letters*, 20.

these communities intent on involving them in her writing of Indigenous history.¹⁸ Descendants of about half of the letters selected for inclusion in *Letters* responded, and the editors were given permission to publish by most families, leading to the eventual inclusion of letters from eighty-one women.

The approach taken by Nelson, Smith and Grimshaw had been influenced by the Virago reissue of *Maternity Letters From Working Women* in 1978, first published in 1915 by the Women's Cooperative Guild in London, and which sought to give such women a voice through their own writings. The method accords with that of other historians and epistolary scholars in search of voices from more private spaces in history, working with the letters of minority groups and approaching such sources from that perspective. Robert Starobin's *Blacks in Bondage: Letters of American Slaves* is another early example of such letter publication. Starobin presented letters that 'spoke to the slaves' understanding of slavery ... the letters reflect slaves' thought, emotions and feelings while still in bondage. They preserve the words, spelling, grammar and punctuations and alliteration actually used by blacks'.¹⁹ That Starobin located several hundred letters written by slaves is extraordinary in light of the fact that the law prohibited the teaching of slaves to read and write, meaning that the vast majority, as high as ninety per cent, remained illiterate. Yet he cautioned that imposing 'the

¹⁸ Diane Barwick, *Rebellion at Coranderrk*, eds Laura E. Barwick and Richard E. Barwick (Canberra: Aboriginal History Inc., 1998), monograph 5.

¹⁹ Robert S. Starobin, *Blacks in Bondage: Letters of American Slaves* (Princeton: Markus Weiner Publishers, 1994 [1974]), xix.

white man's standards of literacy on the enslaved is both irrelevant and arrogant [and] often masks the ability of the barely literate bondsmen to speak their mind'.²⁰ Despite such prudence, however, without literacy such interventions are virtually inaccessible except through oral histories, which do not always survive.

More recently, Katrina M. Powell's study of the creation of a national park in the State of Virginia in the late 1920s, *The Anguish of Displacement: The Politics of Literacy in the Letters of Mountain Families in Shenandoah National Park*, details the concerns of families whose ancestors' lives were disrupted by the process and raises similar issues to those that affected Nelson, Smith and Grimshaw's volume. Powell identified a concern about 'a continued misappropriation ... as many see the research and writing about their ancestors as further mistreatment and disrespect'.²¹ Another concern was that the use of phonetic spelling and 'nonstandard language', even set within the accepted formal structure of a letter, meant that the mountain families seeking to engage with the authorities could be dismissed as barely literate.

Likewise, descendants of those correspondents included in *Letters* did not wish to have the letter writers appear as ignorant or uneducated, thereby detracting from the purpose for which the letters had been written. Indeed, one of the most common questions Nelson, Smith and Grimshaw were

²⁰ Ibid., xx.

²¹ Katrina M. Powell, *The Anguish of Displacement: the Politics of Literacy in the Letters of Mountain Families in Shenandoah National Park* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2007), xi.

initially asked was ‘could these women write?’²² As noted in their introduction, ‘[m]any of the women who write the letters in this collection were the first generation of Aboriginal girls in Victoria to receive primary education from mission wives or assistants and teachers appointed by the Education Department on the government reserves’.²³ Schooling was compulsory after 1872, with the introduction of the Victorian Government’s *Compulsory Education Act*. The Government and church authorities had a vested interest in reporting favourably on the mission and reserve education standards for Indigenous children, yet it was also noted that the outcomes of that education were varied, and assimilation not easily achieved. Comments in some of the official reports on missions and reserves indicate that the curriculum had been modified to suit the environment and also the expected outcomes for Indigenous students, which was in fact manual work and domestic service.²⁴ This was made clear in George Baldwin’s 1925 Report on the Lake Tyers Aboriginal Station: ‘Matter which is not likely to benefit the scholar in any way is deleted from the various subjects taught. This tends to shorten the time-table for general subjects and allow more

²² This view was not unusual, as Adam Shoemaker notes in *Black Words White Page: Aboriginal Literature 1929–1988* (Canberra: ANU EPress, 2004), 265: ‘I didn’t know the buggers could write!’ (quoted from a conversation with a Canberra bank manager, 1980).

²³ Nelson et al, *Letters*, 15.

²⁴ Penny Van Toorn, *Writing Never Arrives Naked: Early Aboriginal Cultures of Writing in Australia*, (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2006), 14; P.D. Gardner, *Through Foreign Eyes: European Perceptions of the Kurnai Tribe of Gippsland* (Churchill: Centre for Gippsland Studies, 1988), 54.

time for manual training.’²⁵ Writing on the colonial education of Indigenous children, Amanda Barry acknowledged that she was ‘limited to the archival sources compiled and preserved by white men and women, to find those with very little voice at all: the Aboriginal children (and adults) whom they educated’.²⁶ Even so, the ability of many Indigenous children to read and to write a ‘plain and sensible letter’ was noted by the Reverend Mr Spieseke in his Report on Ebenezer Mission, conducted in 1867.²⁷ Letter writing was taught in schools throughout the nineteenth and well into the mid-twentieth century. The validity of these letters is beyond doubt. Indigenous women could and did write.

One must also acknowledge that these letters were written by those whose own voices, whose own languages, had already been overlaid with another. Many of these women, writing in the later years of the nineteenth and into the twentieth century, had lost even the link to their own languages, in that they had been separated from it through child removal and schooling. Children often slept in segregated dormitories on missions and reserves, the separation from family being

²⁵ Geo. W. Baldwin, ‘Report on the Lake Tyers Aboriginal Station’, 19 August 1925, PROV, VPRS1694/POOOO/9.

²⁶ Amanda Barry, ‘“A Matter of Primary Importance”: Comparing the Colonial Education of Indigenous Children’ in *Rethinking Colonial Histories: New and Alternative Approaches*, eds Penelope Edmonds and Samuel Furphy (Melbourne: RMIT Publishing, 2006), 171.

²⁷ Reverend Mr Spieseke, ‘Report on Ebenezer – River Wimmera, Sixth Paper’, 30 September 1867, PROV, VPRS1694/POOOO/2.

regarded as essential for 'civilisation'.²⁸ Even at this relatively early stage of settlement, many Indigenous languages were what linguists describe as non-functioning. Of the 250 or so Indigenous languages thought to have been spoken at first European contact in the late eighteenth century, comparatively few remained a hundred years on.²⁹ Aboriginal people were programmatically discouraged, indeed prevented, from speaking their ancestral languages and made to feel ashamed of using them in public.

Yet while literacy played a role in the loss of much Indigenous culture and language,³⁰ it also equipped Indigenous communities with the means to negotiate with white authorities, albeit on an unequal footing. It gave them a tool of protest, and their letters are evidence of how persistently they were prepared to use it – women as well as men. This was not passive resistance. Coranderrk manager Joseph Shaw, writing to Reverend Hagenauer in November 1901 stated: 'the natives being now civilised and more or less educated are not so easily managed in large numbers as they

²⁸ Bain Attwood, 'Space and Time at Ramahyuck, Victoria 1863–85' in *Settlement: A History of Australian Indigenous Housing*, ed. Peter Read (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2000), 47.

²⁹ Michael Walsh, 'Languages and Their Status in Aboriginal Australia' in *Language and Culture in Aboriginal Australia*, eds Michael Walsh and Colin Yallop (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 1993), 1. Estimates on the loss of Indigenous languages vary. Heiss and Minter in *PEN Anthology of Aboriginal Literature* state that '[i]t took only a few generations for almost two-thirds of the pre-contact Aboriginal languages to be made extinct', 2.

³⁰ The more emotive term 'obliterate' is used by local Gippsland historian P.D. Gardner, *Through Foreign Eyes*, 56.

were some 40 years ago'.³¹ These women's letters clearly show how writing had the potential to be a political weapon when levelling a range of complaints: against neighbours, mission and reserve staff, and government policy. And as younger residents on missions and reserves learnt to read and write English, it became more difficult to control the flow of information into and out of those missions and reserves. Literacy, regarded initially as a tool of assimilation, also enabled the Indigenous residents to communicate with the outside world, sometimes with but also without the help or knowledge of missionaries and reserve managers. Protests or requests could now be made in writing, behind a missionary or manager's back, to his superiors.³² On numerous occasions, women wrote to the Premier of Victoria. In October 1921, for example, Maggie Johnson at Lake Tyers sent two letters, in quick succession, to Premier Harry Lawson, requesting the return of her daughter Alison:

Dear Sir,

I am writing you these few lines asking if you would please be so kind as to use your influence with the Aboriginal Board with regard to my little Daughter who was taken away from us three or four years ago. When the members visited our Mission Station, they promised my Husband & I that they would send our little girl home over two months ago,

³¹ Joseph Shaw to Reverend Hagenauer, 23 November 1901, Coranderk Letterbook, PROV, VPRS926/POOOO/1.

³² Van Toorn, *Writing Never Arrives Naked*, 161.

that was the first week in August we were to have her home, Now we are told that she are sick & wont be able to return until they are better, Sir, I lost two nieces almost under the same circumstances[.] If I cant have her here home with me, there is nothing else for me to do but leave the Station, the Board promises one thing & generally do another, they forget that we are human

Hoping you will do your best for my child

Thanking you in anticipation

I beg to remain Sir,

Yours sincerely

(Mrs) M. Johnson³³

Followed by:

Dear Sir

I am writing you these few lines to you asking if you would please be so kind as to use your influence with the Aboriginal Board with regard to my little Daughter who is at the Convent I don't know whether she is very ill with influenza or not. Mr Parker was down

³³ Mrs Maggie Johnson to Premier Harry Lawson, October 1921, PROV, VPRS 1694/POOOO/9.

here last Sunday & he told me about her she had influenza. I don't know whether she is ill or not[;] at any rate they promised me that they would send her home soon after the meeting was over[;] she might be very ill at the Convent & Im worrying myself to death over her. Dear Sir I wish you could assist me. I would like you to see about her & please to let me know at once

I beg to remain Sir

Yours Sincerely

Maggie Johnson³⁴

The Premier forwarded Maggie's two letters to the Board and her daughter Alison was finally returned to Lake Tyers on 20 December 1921.

Rose Johnson sent her appeal to be returned, with her family, to their homelands at Lake Tyers from Lake Condah directly to the Governor of Victoria:

His Excellency the Governor

Sir Arthur Stanley

³⁴ Ibid.

I am applying to you your Excellency for your help

Your Excellency

I have received any instructing from the Members of the Boards of my returning back home again to the Lake Tyers Mission Station

Your Excellency

I wish to appeal for a free pass for myself and two children

Trusting your Excellency will see into it

I am your most humble servant

Rose Foster³⁵

The letter was forwarded to the BPA, who refused to grant the request.

These are but two examples of Indigenous women's determination to devote time and effort to writing to the authorities. The BPA exercised almost complete control over Indigenous people, but their response was not passive. The majority of these letters display a neat, cursive hand and a fair grasp of grammar, spelling and punctuation. They are structured formally, often with lengthy salutations, such as that employed by Mrs Jemima Dunolly when writing to the

³⁵ Rose Foster to the Governor of Victoria, 24 November 1916, NAA B337/1, 253.

Secretary of the BPA to obtain a pass to visit her husband in hospital:

Sir

A very pleasant opportunity prevails itself to me for to pen you these few lines trusting you and yours are enjoying the very best of health as it leaves me enjoying good health at present.³⁶

Great care has been taken with handwriting, possibly suggesting a final draft after a few attempts. Some are written in pencil, on pages torn from exercise books, but others are on decorated note paper, written in ink. There are occasional indications, through different hands, that more than one person has been involved with the writing of letters, perhaps family members or friends rather than a person acting as a scribe. Stationery supplies were available for purchase on missions and reserves, supporting evidence that not only were the people on the missions literate but they were known to be active correspondents. By 1918, for example, a cash store had been established at Lake Tyers for the residents, and the 'Requisition for Sale Store Goods' sent to Melbourne on 3 March by the manager G.E. Ferguson included the following items: '240 one penny Postage Stamps, £2 value Stationery: Writing Tablets (cheap), Envelopes to suit above, Ink (small bottles), Pens.'³⁷

³⁶ Mrs Jemima Dunolly to Mr Ditchburn, Secretary of the BPA, 1 October 1916, PROV, VPRS1694/POOOO/3.

³⁷ G.E. Ferguson, 'Requisition for Sale Store Goods, Not in Annual Contract for Provisions', 3 March 1918, PROV, VPRS 1694/POOOO/2.

The women were able to post their own letters or have them posted on their behalf on the reserves and missions or in local towns, which would indicate an assumption of privacy that may have been misplaced. There is evidence that some letters were intercepted by heads of missions and reserves. On one recorded occasion, Mrs Anne Fraser Bon, a wealthy, widowed white pastoralist who was for many years a member of the Board for the Protection of Aborigines, intervened at the request of Mrs Florence Moffatt, a resident of the Lake Tyers station.³⁸ Mrs Moffatt's letter had been opened by the acting manager of Lake Tyers, Charles Greene. Mrs Bon complained to the BPA: 'there is a direct contradiction between the Statement of Mrs Moffatt & that of Mr Greene. The latter states he took the letters out of his mailbag, opened, read & kept it – which is illegal – She states he took the letter from the pocket of the mailbag'.³⁹ The BPA responded promptly to Mrs Bon, noting that 'it was directed that the manager at Lake Tyers be instructed that he had no right to interfere with the correspondence of the residents at the station'.⁴⁰ Greene, however, intercepted the mail of residents on numerous occasions, and with the knowledge and permission of the BPA.

The boundary between private and public is blurred when individuals write personal letters to the authorities; letters

³⁸ Liz Reed, "'Mrs Bon's Verandah Full of Aborigines': Race, Class, Gender and Friendship', *History Australia*, 2(2), 2005, 39.1-39.15. Bon was a life-long advocate for Aborigines in Victoria.

³⁹ Anne Bon to Mr Calloway, Vice-Chairman of the BPA, 3 July 1916, PROV, VPRS 1694/POOOO/9.

⁴⁰ W.A. Calloway to Mrs A.F. Bon, 5 July 1916, VPRS 1694/POOOO/9.

that potentially will be read and circulated quite widely. Women such as Lena Austin wrote in the full knowledge that this was the case. In a letter to Mr Macleod, the Chief Secretary of the BPA on 29 March 1917, she not only requested the return of her daughter Winnie from Lake Condah to Purnim, but also complained about the behaviour of Mrs Galbraith, the wife of the Lake Condah reserve manager:

Dear sir in writing you these few lines hoping it will find you enjoying the very best of health as it leaves me not very well at present[.] Dear sir I am thinking about my poor little girl winnie[;] she is longing to come home again to her own native part ... Dear sir I don't know what they is keeping my winnie there for[;] my sister got a letter from Winnie the very same day you was here and Winnie was telling her that Mrs Galbraith is treating her very unkindly ... dear sir if you could only see the letters that my poor little girl writes home it would make your heart ache ... Mr Macleod I plead with you from the very depth of my poor heart just for sake of my little girl as she is breaking her heart to come home once again as Mrs Galbraith is over working her⁴¹

Lena also wrote to Winnie, and attached to *this* letter a note saying: 'Dear Winnie I am sending your letter in aunty flora's

⁴¹ Lena Austin to Mr McLeod, Chief Secretary of the BPA, 29 March 1917, PROV, VPRS 1694/POOOOO/8.

letter because old mother Galley might open it and I dont want [her] to see your letter’.

A memo sent to Lena from the secretary of the BPA on 18 June dismissed her request for her daughter’s return on the grounds that it would not be in Winnie’s best interests. Undeterred, Lena Austin then wrote to Mrs Galbraith (old mother Galley) in December 1917:

Dear Mrs Galbraith I now take the pleasure in writing to you these few lines hoping it will find you and Mr Galbraith in the very best of health as it leaves all the people here quite well in the present time. Dear Mrs Galbraith I received a postcard from my winnie and she was telling me that you and Mr Galbraith would like her to come home for Xmas ... it is nearly two years since I have seen her[.] I have reared that child up from a babyhood ... If you only knew what a mothers love is for her children you would feel it very much[.]

Mrs Galbraith forwarded the letter to the BPA, and Mrs Anne Fraser Bon also intervened on Winnie’s behalf. It was to no avail. Winnie was transferred, twelve months later, to the Salvation Army Home at East Kew from which she was to be placed in service.

These examples demonstrate that the writers understood their letters were likely to be read beyond either the bounds of a private dialogue or a private communication to a public officer. They now form part of a restricted but nevertheless

public archive. Within the BPA archives these women's letters are filed chronologically and by mission or reserve, interleaved with a wide variety of other documents related to their administration: official correspondence, store orders, head counts, reports on agricultural output from missions and reserves, housing and clothing requirements, educational resources, medical reports. For the most part, these are impersonal records generated by those employed by the Church and by government authorities.

It is now widely accepted that the use of such archives, with all their biases and limitations defined by what has survived for inclusion, requires an understanding of the institutions these archives served. There has been a 'turn away from the positivist understanding of archival repositories as being mere storehouses of records, toward considering the status of the archive as a significant element in our investigations'.⁴² As Michael Christie notes, 'there is still a need to challenge historical descriptions, to investigate the language used, and to ask who said what, when and why'.⁴³ Ann Laura Stoler, however, states that 'students of the colonial have turned the tables; to reflect on colonial documents as "rituals of possession", as relics and ruins, as sites of contested cultural knowledge ... unquiet movements in a field of force, as restless realignments and readjustments of people and the beliefs to

⁴² Maryanne Dever, Sally Newman and Ann Vickery, *The Intimate Archive: Journeys Through Private Papers* (Canberra: National Library of Australia, 2009), 10.

⁴³Michael Christie, 'The Language of Oppression' in *Language and Culture in Aboriginal Australia*, 171.

which they were tethered'.⁴⁴ In the process, one must wade through folders of official documents 'so weighted with fixed formats, empty phrases, and racial clichés that one is easily blinded by their flattened prose and numbing dullness'.⁴⁵ Interleaved as they are with official documents in the archives, these women's letters nevertheless stand out because of their style, their content and their very appearance: the handwriting and the paper on which the letters are written. In the archives, the letters are occasional individual voices addressing a range of matters.

In published form, the effect of the letters selected is heightened because the editors have grouped the correspondence chronologically and by letter writer into six sections: Children and Family, Land and Housing, Asserting Personal Freedom, Regarding Missionaries and Station Managers, Religion, and Sustenance and Material Assistance. Under these headings, the collective content of the letters is given more prominence, and gives the impression of a more coordinated form of protest and complaint than might have been the case as experienced by the letter writer. Grouped in this manner, however, the letters attain a narrative structure that provides a mediated way into the archive while also allowing the reader to gain a stronger sense of the person writing. Nine letters written by Ada Austin from Lake Condah, Purnim and Framlingham between 1917 and 1920,

⁴⁴ Anne Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 32.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 23.

for example, provide a kind of family portrait; Ada wrote to the Secretary and the Chief Secretary of the BPA, as well as her local Member of the Legislative Assembly about matters concerning various members of her family. Most of her letters run to several pages, and she was not one to mince words, stating in one letter, 'Dear Sir I hope to hear from you as soon as possible. it seems because we are black people they can do what they like with us they ought to treat us all alike as we got relations fighting at the front.'⁴⁶

Sorting the letters under designated headings affected the cutting and shaping of the correspondence during the editing process. Women wrote letters that often crossed several topics, and an editorial decision had to be made as to where the letter would be best placed.⁴⁷ A letter from Amelia Rose, at Purnim, to Mr Ditchburn, secretary of the BPA, for example, was cut by three quarters for publication in the section Children and Family. In published form it is a short, polite letter concerning one of Amelia Rose's sons, who had been ill with meningitis for ten weeks. In its original form, the bulk of the letter is in fact a lengthy complaint about the allegedly disgraceful behaviour of several of Amelia Rose's neighbours and their children, and the failure of the authorities, both the station manager and the police, to address these complaints.⁴⁸ The neighbours to whom she

⁴⁶ Ada Austin to Mr Bailey, MLA, Port Fairy, 1918, PROV, VPRS1694/POOOO/8.

⁴⁷ See my article 'Editorial Practice and Epistolarity' for a comparison of trade and scholarly editorial practices.

⁴⁸ Amelia Rose to Mr Ditchbourne [sic], 29 January 1917, PROV, VPRS1694/POOOO/9.

referred were members of a family with a presence in *Letters*, indicating that the family concerned were consulted about having such material removed.

Despite their care with copyright and collaboration, however, the editors encountered legal constraints during the publishing process of *Letters* when it was released in 2002 by the University of Melbourne's then Department of History, as part of their Research Papers Series. The Department met the immediate costs of producing a modest print run of 200 copies in paperback on the understanding that Patricia Grimshaw would undertake to sell the entire print run in order to recoup those costs. The advice of the university's legal office was to cover costs but make no profit, in order to avoid any legal action on the part of Indigenous communities.⁴⁹ Copies of the book were presented to families of the letter writers, who appreciated the sensitivity exercised by the editors. Far from being offended, as might have been the case had not such care been taken in ensuring the integrity of the research and the respect shown to the families, these communities described *Letters* as being 'a telling of their own history in their own words'.⁵⁰ The respectful and collaborative approach had given them a strong sense of ownership of the material, and had been achieved within the framework of Indigenous community copyright beliefs: information that is collectively owned.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Patricia Grimshaw, email message to author, 27 June 2013.

⁵⁰ Patricia Grimshaw, email message to author, 7 March 2009.

⁵¹ Terri Janke's chapter 'Managing Indigenous Knowledge and Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property', in *Australian Indigenous Knowledge*

Despite the support and goodwill that surrounded the initial publication, it proved difficult to generate review coverage, even though (or possibly because, in the case of a conservative press and a conservative federal government unwilling to apologise to Indigenous Australians) the book was released when the Australian History Wars were in full swing. *Letters* was also published only a few years after the release in 1997 of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission's official report on the removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families: *Bringing Them Home*. The book had a direct connection to the latter publication in its subject matter, evident in the section headings outlined above.

Both publications sought to make Indigenous women's voices more publicly prominent than had previously been the case. And the structure of *Letters*, framed as it is by incisive introductory essays, creates a narrative for the correspondence and emphasises issues of particular concern to Indigenous women, revealing how they viewed their own lives and the 'context within which they and their families were living'.⁵²

Context was a key concern for Nelson, Smith and Grimshaw in relation to the archives, to the Indigenous communities with whom they worked, to major issues that affected these women's lives and, finally, in relation to the editorial processes they followed. Drawing on an extensive and

and Libraries provides an insightful legal analysis of rights to Indigenous knowledge.

⁵² Van Toorn, *Writing Never Arrives Naked*, 175.

problematic archive, now subject to a cultural sensitivity overlay, the editors of *Letters From Aboriginal Women of Victoria* produced an accessible and well-structured narrative that documents individual as well as family stories within the broader framework of a complex and confronting period in Australian history. This correspondence is an important Indigenous record, deserving of more attention. The republishing of the collection would facilitate this.