Imprisonment and isolation have spurred men and women to find means whereby they can communicate over distance and time.¹

Palmerston² Gaol and Labour Prison, Fannie Bay (‘Fannie Bay Gaol’), opened on 20 September 1883 and operated as the Northern Territory’s principal institution for the detention, long-term incarceration and rehabilitation of convicted criminals until 1 September 1979.³ Located on a main road leading to East Point Recreation Reserve and facing a picturesque bay, the complex of surviving gaol buildings, enclosed by perimeter walls, today serves as a tangible reminder of a penal system which reflected the laws and mores of a frontier community in North Australia for nearly a century. Heritage–listed and managed by the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory (MAGNT), the Gaol as ‘museum’ has, in recent years, become a major local and tourist attraction on the town’s historical map, and a venue for social functions, dramatic performances,⁴ and even weddings.

Interpretation of the site’s historical and architectural significance, and its key role in the history of the criminal justice system in the Northern Territory, have drawn the attention of a range of scholars and experts — including heritage consultants, architects, historians, social scientists and archaeologists — all of whom have added another dimension to our understanding of the Gaol's enduring legacy. In her recently published social history of Fannie Bay Gaol, Mickey Dewar (Curator, Northern Territory History, MAGNT) has noted that in general, histories of prisons or prisoners are relatively uncommon and that penology is usually the province of social scientists.⁵ In the Northern Territory, documentary sources regarding both inmates and prison administrators, particularly in the nineteenth century, are scarce or uneven; more recent perspectives ‘from the inside’, including official prison records, are protected by confidentiality or the ‘thirty year embargo’ on government records.⁶ There does exist however, a rare body of work which was created by Aboriginal prisoners at Fannie Bay Gaol during the late 1880s, commissioned by the then Deputy Sheriff (John George Knight) and exhibited at the Melbourne Centennial International Exhibition in 1888–89. Entitled ‘The Dawn of Art’, this collection has not, until relatively recently, received critical attention and public recognition.⁷

² The original township of Darwin was known as ‘Palmerston’ or ‘Port Darwin’ during the period of South Australian administration, following survey and settlement in 1869. With the transfer of control to the Commonwealth in 1911, the name ‘Darwin’ was officially adopted.
³ Darwin Prison, Berrimah, was officially opened on 1 September 1979: M. Dewar, *Inside-Out: A Social History of Fannie Bay Gaol* (Darwin: NTU Press, 1999), 144.
⁴ During Law Week in 2000, the Law Society of the NT and members of the legal profession, the Office of the DPP and the criminal Bar, staged several nightly performances of the trial reported in *R v Tuckiar* on-site at Fannie Bay Gaol. In July 2001, Tania Lieman and Nicky Fearn directed the theatrical production ‘Filling in Time’ at the site, also at night. Featuring live music, puppetry and shadow imagery, it aimed to bring ‘the gaol’s history to life’.
⁵ As the author points out, however, there are numerous published accounts in Australia of individual institutions, famous legal cases or notorious prisoners. See Dewar, *Inside-Out*, vii, and references to other studies of Fannie Bay Gaol.
⁶ ‘Freedom of information’ legislation was never passed during the twenty-six years that the Country Liberal Party (CLP) governed the Northern Territory. The recently elected Labor Party Government has, however, announced its intention to table such legislation in the near future.
⁷ In collaboration with the South Australian Museum, which holds eighteen drawings from the Knight collection, MAGNT erected a prominent display, featuring copies of the drawings and text panels, in the maximum security section of the Fannie Bay Gaol complex in 2001.
Examination of the distinctive circumstances which led to this unprecedented commission and exhibition, the nature of the work produced ‘inside’ and publicly exhibited ‘outside’, and the works’ significance historically and art historically, are the main concerns of this paper.

In late nineteenth-century northern Australia, during periods of sustained contact between white colonisers and local Aborigines, significant developments in penal history, museum and exhibition history, and art history, appear to have taken place at about the same time. John George Knight, by virtue of the many official posts he held during this period, was at the centre of several ‘social spaces’ on the northern frontier — including the gaol. He was also a conduit to others — the world of institutional and private collectors, and intercolonial and international exhibitions. With the general support of the local Palmerston community, he moved relatively freely through many social spheres, stimulating cross-currents of reform and innovation. If, as Andrew Sayers has stated, the ‘greatest difficulty for the art historian is to reconstruct past visual worlds, and nineteenth-century Australia is as impenetrable as any’, then the starting point for an analysis of ‘The Dawn of Art’ drawings should be Palmerston Gaol and Labour Prison in the 1880s, as administered by Knight. This was the space within a frontier society in which the drawings were created; he was the pivotal figure who controlled both the administration of the prison’s labour programme and aspects of its architectural design, whilst influencing colonial exhibition practice and museum history in late nineteenth-century north Australia.

There appear to have been only three published references to Knight’s ‘Dawn of Art’ collection of drawings in the last two decades. Each has contributed some degree of knowledge of the history of the works’ creation, exhibition and public reception in the nineteenth century, as well as information on the artists. However, several key issues remain to be addressed — the possible motivations for Knight’s commission, whether all of the artists were inmates at Fannie Bay Gaol at the relevant time, the quantity of drawings produced, the manner of their exhibition and their eventual disposition, as well as the collection’s significance within the context of nineteenth-century Palmerston, both inside and outside the gaol walls. An examination of these issues is timely, given recent academic research on what has been described as the ‘hidden history’ of Australian Aboriginal prison artists, whose ‘historical agency’, it is argued, should not be underestimated. Described as an expression of ‘the radical political experience of culture in exile’, their art work is said to offer further evidence of the resilience and adaptability of Aboriginal culture within the context of ‘repressive regimes’, of which prison is but one example.

The first published reference to ‘The Dawn of Art’ collection in recent times is found in Philip Jones’ 1988 scholarly essay ‘Perceptions of Aboriginal Art: A History’, which examines the reception of Aboriginal art by Western audiences from first settlement to the present. The author analyses how our appreciation of Aboriginal art and material culture have developed and matured over two centuries of sustained contact with Indigenous Australians, and how our perceptions have been affected by a number of historical factors. These factors include: the rise of anthropology as a discrete discipline, Australian artists’ and art critics’ gradual interest in Aboriginal art, the inclusion or exclusion of Aboriginal art from museum and art gallery collections and most significantly perhaps, the display of Aboriginal art and material culture in public exhibitions.

Within the context of Jones’ historical review, Knight’s deliberate decision publicly to exhibit drawings by Northern Territory Aborigines as ‘art’ is considered to be unusual and unique for its time. Until the (then) National Museum of Victoria’s ground-breaking Primitive Art exhibition in July 1929, which provided the general public with a far more comprehensive review of Aboriginal art and material culture from across Australia than hitherto seen, Australian

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Indigenous art lacked an informed or appreciative audience. It was generally regarded as devoid of the aesthetic principles embodied in the Western canon, and vastly inferior — both technically and stylistically — to the ‘primitive art’ of the Pacific and Oceanic regions.\footnote{Jones, ‘Perceptions’, 165-166. And see J. Mackay, “‘A Good Show’: Colonial Queensland at International Exhibitions’, Memoirs of the Queensland Museum — Cultural Heritage Series 1, Part 2 (1998), Ch. 4.}

Dispensing with the usual rhetoric (‘ornament’ or ‘decoration’), ‘The Dawn of Art’ display at the Melbourne Centennial International Exhibition was possibly the world’s first exhibition of Aboriginal art as ‘art’ — not artefact — and for this Knight is to be acknowledged.\footnote{Jones, ‘Perceptions’, 165-166. The author infers that the drawings were first shown in Adelaide some time in 1887. Knight was at this time engaged in preparing the Northern Territory Court at the Adelaide Jubilee International Exhibition. He was on leave from official duties in Palmerston from 5 May to early December 1887. There is no record, so far as I have been able to ascertain, of ‘The Dawn of Art’ collection being shown at the Adelaide Jubilee exhibition. Available evidence indicates that the drawings were commissioned and executed in early 1888. See also footnote 70.} Knight’s characterisation of the drawings reflected a radical departure from the usual portrayal of Aboriginal art and/or material culture, in museums and at intercolonial and international exhibitions, as an assemblage of ethnographic curiosities by anonymous craftsmen — the relics of a ‘dying race’ unable to withstand the ‘progressive’ impact of white civilisation in colonial Australia. In acknowledging that north Australian Aborigines — and what is perhaps more significant, convicted Aboriginal prisoners — were capable of creating ‘art’ was tantamount to an admission of their humanity. From within the confines of a nineteenth-century frontier prison, this called for a re-evaluation of the complex and conflicted relationship between coloniser and colonised which was many years ahead of its time.

Jones cites Thomas Worsnop’s The Prehistoric Arts, Manufactures, Works, Weapons, etc. of the Aborigines of Australia,\footnote{Thomas Worsnop’s The Prehistoric Arts, Manufactures, Works, Weapons, etc. of the Aborigines of Australia (Adelaide: C.E. Bristow, Government Printer, 1897). Worsnop’s book, as ‘compiled and collated’, claimed to be ‘an attempt to rescue from oblivion the primeval antiquities of Australia’ and to show that Aboriginal ‘artistic productions…will bear very favourable comparison with those of prehistoric man in any other part of the world’, v.} as a second exceptional example of an approach to Aboriginal artistic practice which was at odds with that prevalent amongst ethnographers, museum curators and exhibition organisers during this period.\footnote{Worsnop was Town Clerk in Adelaide at the time. Knight’s extensive list of official posts in the 1880s is discussed later in this paper. P. Sutton, P. Jones and S. Hemming, ‘Survival, Regeneration and Impact’, in *Dreamings*, 191. P. Jones speculates that Worsnop’s interest in Aboriginal art may have been inspired by seeing Knight’s collection in Adelaide during the late 1880s: Jones, ‘Perceptions’, 165.} Worsnop, like Knight, seems to have combined an interest in the arts with official duties; neither man was ‘bound by the taxonomic rigidities of nineteenth-century ethnography’.\footnote{Worsnop, Prehistoric Arts, 37; plates 19, 20.} In Worsnop’s case, this was reflected in the eclectic compilation of research material, anecdotal evidence, field notes and copy sketches of Aboriginal drawings which comprise his book. The plates include two examples of mural drawings (undated) made by Aboriginal inmates at Palmerston Gaol and Labour Prison.\footnote{SA Museum, Item AA169, Collection Documentation, ‘Copies of figures and drawings by a native prisoner on the walls of Palmerston Gaol, NT, from the estate of Thomas Worsnop’ (one sheet). Letter, K.R. Clarke, Curatorial Officer, Anthropology, South Australian Museum, to Assoc Prof David Carment, NT University, 15 August 1991.} A copy of one of the mural drawings (plate 20) was accessioned into the collection of the South Australian Museum at the same time as, and together with, ‘The Dawn of Art’ drawings in 1958, and is recorded as emanating from Worsnop’s estate.\footnote{Contra Sayers, Aboriginal Artists, 83; S. Kleinert, ‘prison art’, in *The Oxford Companion to Aboriginal Art & Culture*, S. Kleinert and M. Neale, (Oxford & ACT: Oxford University Press & Australian National University, 2000), 678-679.} This aside, evidence as to whether the original murals and the drawings on paper from Palmerston Gaol were executed by one or more of the same artists is inconclusive.\footnote{Jones, ‘Perceptions’, 166.} ‘The Dawn of Art’ drawings on paper remain ‘the earliest surviving examples of their kind from northern Australia’.\footnote{Jones, ‘Perceptions’, 166.}
In 1994, Andrew Sayers’ landmark publication, *Aboriginal Artists of the Nineteenth Century*, provided an art historian’s perspective on the neglected subject of Australian Aboriginal artists’ drawings on paper. Several of the individual artists Sayers discusses (for example William Barak, from Victoria) incorporated traditional Aboriginal art materials in their work, such as ochres and charcoal, but more often they utilised introduced European media (pencils, inks). Likewise the subject matter of the drawings ranges from depictions of traditional ceremonies, hunting scenes and religious motifs, to contemporary accounts of the impact of white colonisation on Aboriginal society — including the imposition of an English system of law and order. None of the drawings were created as a consequence of anthropological fieldwork. Significantly, the author dedicates a discrete chapter to Knight’s ‘Dawn of Art’ collection.

Scattered throughout Australia and abroad, and held in archives, libraries, museums and private collections, nineteenth-century Aboriginal drawings on paper had been rarely displayed or reproduced until Sayers’ publication, and never before studied as a discrete artistic genre. There are several reasons for this. First, the work was widely dispersed and did not form part of the collections of many Australian art galleries. As Sayers explains, ‘the pattern of collecting by public institutions’ was ‘responsible for placing works into categories which defined their reception and interpretation’. He notes that the known provenance of Knight’s collection (from the South Australian School of Arts, thence the South Australian Museum in 1958) indicates a shift in their appreciation as ‘applied art’ to the ‘material’ of ethnographic study — both at odds with Knight’s primary objectives at the Melbourne Exhibition. In their current location, ‘they look like precursors to the sheets of crayon drawings collected for the Museum from the 1930s onwards by Norman Tindale and Charles Mountford.’ There is some justification for this view. Tindale was Curator of Anthropology at the South Australian Museum at the time the works were accessioned into the collection. In a letter from H.M. Hale (the then Director) to Mr P. Beadle (Principal, South Australian School of Arts) in 1958, the writer notes that Tindale assembled the drawings together ‘in book form with a printed title page’, and that they ‘make a most useful addition to our records of the aborigines’. As will be discussed later, this perspective differs dramatically from their method of display and promotion by Knight at the Melbourne Exhibition in 1888.

A second reason for the lack of public recognition of Aboriginal drawings of the nineteenth century (and indeed, drawings in general) has been the secondary status traditionally afforded to them in the Western art canon. This has tended to assert the superiority of paintings over drawings as ‘finished’ works, worthy of elevation to the category of ‘fine art’. At the time of writing his book, Sayers was Curator of Drawings at the National Gallery of Australia, and was therefore well-placed to state a case in their favour. Thirdly, in the twentieth century, most scholarly research on Aboriginal art tended to focus on paintings on bark and, since the early 1970s, on the acrylic painting movement in the Central and Western Desert. Drawings on paper by Aboriginal artists were wrongly considered to be ‘inauthentic’ or ‘untraditional’ either because of the media employed, the subject matter depicted or the manner of their execution. Even worse perhaps, they have also been regarded as mere ‘case studies in the impact of colonisation on a pre–existent visual language’ and denied that ‘quality of visual independence’ once thought to be lacking in the art of Aboriginal artists such as Albert Namatjira and the early exponents of the Western Desert acrylic art movement.

There are very few surviving examples of nineteenth-century Aboriginal bark paintings; a market for such work from North Australia was not generated until at least 1912. The few bark

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21 Ibid.
23 Sayers refers to the ‘increasing specialisation of scholarship in the twentieth century’ in the field of Aboriginal art research and publications: *Aboriginal Artists*, 83.
24 Ibid., 8.
25 J. Ryan refers to Baldwin Spencer as the first ‘patron’ of Aboriginal art when, as Protector of Aborigines, he commissioned from the Kakadu of Oenpelli a series of large bark paintings similar in scale and style to...
paintings from this period which have survived are generally considered to be unremarkable in aesthetic terms and only of historical value. Until Sayers’ publication, the nineteenth century was erroneously considered to be something of an artistic vacuum in the history of Aboriginal art of a portable nature. Research interests and publications have focused on the extensive body of Aboriginal rock art from this period and beyond, particularly in North Australia. It is now apparent that colonial post–contact drawings on paper in fact comprised a significant proportion of Aboriginal artistic practice in the nineteenth century. Furthermore, as Sayers notes, although many examples of rock art from the contact period may include similar subject matter to nineteenth-century drawings on paper (encounters with Macassans, Chinese and Europeans), we generally know very little of their makers. This can be distinguished from the work of artists who created drawings on paper, of whom we know a good deal more. There is less of an opportunity to attribute to their drawings the ‘anonymity of artefacts’. Our appreciation of them, in what is essentially a very personal and intimate medium, is thereby enhanced.

Sayers’ publication provides us with some vital information regarding the five ‘Dawn of Art’ artists incarcerated at Fannie Bay Gaol at the time of Knight’s commission. However, compared with several other individual artists who comprise the real focus of his book (William Barak, Mickey of Ulladulla and Tommy McRae, all from the eastern seaboard), ‘The Dawn of Art’ artists do not fare so well. One can almost sense Sayers’ frustration at the lack of documentary evidence available to him. Compared with Barak, Mickey of Ulladulla and McRae, whose practices were sustained and whose work was extensively collected and preserved, the Fannie Bay Gaol artists’ work assumes the status of a ‘one–off’ experiment at the request of a maverick Deputy–Sheriff, with nothing better to do than run an art class whilst on duty. For Sayers, the works’ visual independence seems to be undermined by the fact that the collection was commissioned, and that the nature of Knight’s ‘brief’ to the artists (assuming there was one), is ‘impossible to know’. This is perhaps unnecessarily harsh, as it underestimates both the artists’ achievements, and Knight’s attitude to his official duties, particularly where Aborigines were concerned, as well as his outstanding record of patronage and promotion of the arts and sciences.

Sayers emphasises the importance of establishing an historical context for the drawings on paper he examines at length. However he fails properly to acknowledge the context for the creation of ‘The Dawn of Art’ drawings — a nineteenth-century frontier prison in north Australia — a fact which in itself gives the work an added dimension as ‘art from the inside’. The drawings fall outside the thematic pattern of Sayers’ study; their evaluation suffers somewhat as a result of this.

In The Oxford Companion to Aboriginal Art and Culture (2001), Knight’s ‘Dawn of Art’ collection is placed within the recently evolved category of ‘prison art’, thereby providing an historical precedent for contemporary artistic practice by Aboriginal prisoners across Australia. The important point is made that ironically, it was probably incarceration which served to focus

the rock paintings he had seen: Spirit in Land – Bark Paintings from Arnhem Land (Melbourne: National Gallery of Victoria, 1990), 14.

26 Ibid. Also: P.J. Carroll, ‘Mimi from Western Arnhem Land’, in Form in indigenous art: Schematisation in the art of Aboriginal Australia and prehistoric Europe, Prehistory and Material Culture Series No.13, ed. P.J. Ucko, (Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, 1977), 119–130. The Port Essington (c.1878) and Field Island (c.1884) bark paintings will be briefly discussed later in this paper.

27 Sayers, Aboriginal Artists, 11.

28 Both Jones and Sayers describe the five artists (Billiamook, Davie, Jennie Miller, Paddy, Wandy Wandy) as being either imprisoned, working at the gaol, or living in the Darwin region at the time of Knight’s commission. It is now apparent that all of the artists were incarcerated at Fannie Bay Gaol at the relevant time: Jones, ‘Perceptions’, 166; Sayers, Aboriginal Artists, 115–116; Dewar, Manuscript for text panels, ‘The Dawn of Art’ display, Fannie Bay Gaol, 2001 (Prison Register). Also North Australian; Northern Territory Times and Gazette (NTTG), 17 March 1888. Both Paddy and Billiamook were convicted of receiving and partaking of stolen liquor, and sentenced to six months’ hard labour as of this date.

29 Sayers, Aboriginal Artists, 81.


attention on the wealth of Aboriginal artistic expression in the nineteenth century. Mural sketches and drawings made by Aboriginal prisoners within the confines of their cells or the gaol yard may have provided the impetus for some of the earliest commissions of Aboriginal art, such as Knight's. The other important factors in this equation, were the rise of the museum and exhibition movement, and the curio trade in the late nineteenth century. Both created a demand by private individuals and public institutions in Australia and abroad for ‘specimens’ of the art and material culture of what was perceived to be a race close to extinction. Judith Mackay has examined the treatment afforded Aboriginal exhibits (including Aborigines themselves) at the numerous intercolonial and international exhibitions of this period in which the colony of Queensland participated. In the context of Mackay’s study, Knight’s ‘Dawn of Art’ exhibit at the Melbourne International Exhibition provides an astonishing exception to the prevailing stereotyped depiction of Aboriginal people as barbaric, a foil for white colonial progress and as a race beyond hope of redemption.

Penal history in North Australia, including the control and punishment of its Indigenous inhabitants according to an inherited British system of law and order, bolstered by the concept of terra nullius, can perhaps be said to begin at the site of Victoria Settlement, Port Essington (1838–49). The third and longest-lived British military outpost in the region, it was possibly the location for North Australia’s first purpose-built prison. Commandant of the settlement, Captain John McArthur, unlike many of his predecessors, was known for maintaining greater control over government officials and settlers in the context of race relations. He has also been credited with ‘careful tact’ in his official dealings with local Aborigines. The settlement, which took up such a small portion of Aboriginal land, never needed to be fortified against them. Port Essington would also appear to be the place where, for the first time in North Australia’s history, north coast Aborigines were studied ‘with real interest and care’ by Catholic priest Father Angelo Confalonieri, and linguist and draftsman George Windsor Earl. Both men learnt and transcribed local languages and dialects, noting the geographic location of each. Furthermore, the first paintings on bark by unknown Aboriginal artists (Iwaidja language group) ever to be collected by Europeans in North Australia, emanate from this region.

With the natives of Port E we are on the best of terms; the building of two solitary cells has even put a stop to thieving; two days confinement having more

32 Ibid., 678.
33 Mackay, ‘A Good Show’, chapter 4. For a similar but less extensive study on the NT’s contribution to the nineteenth intercolonial and international exhibitions, see Anita Angel, ‘Collecting and Exhibiting the Northern Territory — Retracing a Museum History on the Frontier in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries’ (Grad Dip thesis, Northern Territory University, 1998). An abridged version of this paper is in press: Historical Society of the NT, Centenary of Federation publication, Darwin, 2001.
34 Mackay, ‘A Good Show’, chapter 4. The author states that Aborigines were in fact ‘edited out’ of the Melbourne Exhibitions of 1880-81 and 1888-89, the latter exhibition providing ‘an insight into the emerging national ethos’, 234.
35 Dewar, Inside-Out, Appendix 1, 153-158. The first two settlements were Fort Dundas, Melville Island (1824-28) and Fort Wellington, Raffles Bay (1827-29).
36 Ibid., 154.
38 Confalonieri wrote vocabularies for seven Aboriginal dialects and drafted a map indicating the spread of language groups. Earl was responsible for identifying four language groups on the Cobourg Peninsula, three of which were later identified by N.B. Tindale: Powell, Far Country, 63-64.
39 It is thought that the eight Port Essington bark paintings were painted in the 1870s. There is no extant documentation as to who collected them and when. They are preserved in the Macleay Museum, Sydney and were first mentioned in J.C. Cox, ‘Drawings by Australian Aborigines’, in The Proceedings of the Linnean Society of NSW III, Part 2 (1878), 155-160. Personal communication from S. Davies, Macleay Museum, 16 June 1999. And see: Ryan, Spirit in Land, 14; Philip G. Jones, ‘A Box of Native Things: Ethnographic Collectors & the S.A Museum, 1830s-1930s’ (PhD thesis, University of Adelaide, 1996).
effect upon them than any corporal punishment however severe. They seem to be afraid of some bad spirit coming to them when they are alone in the tank.40

Stanley’s sentiments echo those of G.W. Earl the previous year, that for Aboriginal prisoners, ‘by far the greatest punishment’ was ‘confinement for a week in irons’.41 The early discovery that incarceration, particularly solitary confinement, had a potent deterrent effect on potential and actual Aboriginal offenders — often with tragic consequences — was a fact which would shape the history of prison administration and policy-making in the Northern Territory in ensuing years.42 It was forcefully reiterated in the 1980s during the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, and again during the public debate from the mid–1990s onwards concerning the passing of controversial mandatory sentencing laws in the Northern Territory,43 becoming a tenet in the on-going battle for prison reform.

Following the Northern Territory’s annexation to South Australia from New South Wales by Letters Patent on 6 July 1863, a Survey Party headed by G.W. Goyder arrived in Port Darwin in 1869 to establish the new township. Although the first stone dwelling erected in 1870 was Government House, a Courthouse, Town Hall and other civic amenities were not built until much later. A stone lock-up, proclaimed the Palmerston Gaol in 1872, was built almost immediately.44 Conditions were cramped, sanitation was poor and security lax.45 Between September 1873 and November 1875, John George Knight (1826–92) was employed as Secretary and Accountant to the Government Resident in Palmerston, with additional duties as Architect and Supervisor of Works. Born in London, he had trained as an engineer and architect before arriving in Melbourne in February 1852. Over the following two decades, he distinguished himself as one of Victoria’s best known architects and as a successful organiser of the colony’s exhibits at intercolonial and international exhibitions during the 1860s, a task he would repeat on the Northern Territory’s behalf in May 1875 for the Victorian Intercolonial Exhibition in Melbourne later that year.46

During his first stint in Palmerston, Knight presented a comprehensive ‘review of Government Works and Buildings’ and a ‘Report on Building Materials’ in the Territory to the Government Resident (11 March 1874), which was forwarded to Adelaide. The structures for which he had responsibility and recommended improvement included the police and trooper’s quarters, the first police station and the gaol. The latter was the subject of particular criticism for its lack of security, a fact necessitating the use of leg irons on prisoners. By the end of his tenure however, he had been largely responsible for providing the areas of European settlement with the beginnings of an ‘adequate infrastructure’ — including the building of basic gaol cells, which together with a solitary confinement section, were nevertheless primitive by any standards.47

Knight’s contribution to the improvement of prison architecture, and therefore to prisoner living conditions in the Northern Territory, was first apparent in the planning stages for the construction of Fannie Bay Gaol in the early 1880s.48 During this decade, his numerous official posts included Clerk of Palmerston Court, Clerk of the Licensing Bench, Registrar,  

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40 Quoted in Dewar, *Inside-Out*, Appendix 1, footnote 5, 154.  
41 Ibid., footnote 3, 154.  
42 Prison design at Fannie Bay Gaol was adapted in later years to accommodate Aborigines in Sydney Williams’ style ‘communal cells’ as a means of alleviating the acute anxiety and depression they are known to experience in confined, solitary enclosures. See D. Carment, *Looking at Darwin’s Past – Material Evidence of European Settlement in Tropical Australia* (Darwin: NARU, Australian National University, 1996), 30.  
43 The former CLP Government’s regime of mandatory sentencing laws were abolished (in relation to property offences) by the Northern Territory’s first Labor Government in October 2001.  
44 Dewar, *Inside-Out*, Appendix 1, 154-155. The first Palmerston Gaol was located on Lot 533, corner of Mitchell Street and the Esplanade.  
48 Plans to establish a gaol site further away from town had however been made as early as 1878: Dewar, *Inside-Out*, 155.
Accountant, Official Receiver and Returning Officer, Crown Prosecutor, Special Magistrate, Coroner, Justice of the Peace, Curator of the Property of Convicts, and most significantly in terms of the design and administration of Fannie Bay Gaol, Deputy Sheriff. The old gaol was generally considered to be too close to the town centre and beyond structural repair. In a memo to the Government Resident in May 1885, Knight recalled how in 1880 he had 'made out a very strong report on the inefficiencies of the old gaol accompanied by a plan of the cells and other information'. On his account, what followed was that the old gaol was pulled down and a new one erected at Fannie Bay, some five kilometres from the township.

Although Knight was strongly associated with Fannie Bay Gaol from the early 1880s onwards, he was probably not responsible for the design of the original sixteen–cell stone block which constituted the Gaol's first component. Available documentary sources do, however, strongly infer that he either designed or supervised various subsequent improvements to the Gaol complex. In late 1884 for example, he sent the Government Resident a schedule of additions he believed were required at the Gaol, together with a plan which included an infirmary, a solitary cell, provision for two female prisoners in a separate enclosure, an office for the gaoler, a room for debtors and a store room. The infirmary, eventually built in 1887 and still standing today, closely resembles his suggested designs of 1884 and 1886, and was ascribed to him by the Northern Territory Times. Related issues which would concern Knight were poor sanitation and over–crowding, taken up by the local newspaper after four prisoners died whilst serving sentences in 1886. He also continued to support the Gaol Keeper Frederick E. Becker's earlier written requests for better and more consistent pay scales for prison employees as a means of acquiring more and better–trained reliable staff.

One of the key reasons the Palmerston Gaol and Labour Prison had been relocated to the site at Fannie Bay was its proximity to the Darwin Botanic Gardens, where prison labour was made available to the then Government Gardener, Maurice Holtze. Holtze was principally engaged in experimenting with agricultural crops and commercially–viable fibre plants, as part of the South Australian government’s drive to ensure the Northern Territory’s economic sustainability. A six–day work programme was established at Fannie Bay Gaol whereby prisoners (with the exception of those under sentence of death) were involved in the building and maintenance of the township, bamboo cutting, wood collecting and chopping, clearing the rifle range and racecourse, clearing tracks and roads in the area (including East Point Road), and building the swimming baths at Lameroo Beach. Community expectations of the nature of punishment, reiterated in the Gaol's system of penal servitude, involved not only the deprivation of liberty, but the notion of hard labour at the service of civic needs. In Palmerston, moral and economic imperatives combined a belief in work as a means of reform and rehabilitation, coupled with the fact that the small population of European settlers required a labour force to establish and maintain the township and environs.

Knight came under strong public criticism when he used Aboriginal prisoners to build his mansion on Darwin Harbour ('Knight’s Folly') in 1883, in light of a ruling at the time that Aboriginal inmates were not to be used for work duties outside the gaol walls unless the circumstances were ‘exceptional’ and they were strictly supervised. Not only was it clear to prison administrators at the time that solitary confinement had a particularly distressing effect on Aboriginal prisoners, but their record of attempted escapes was widely acknowledged. Knight’s

49 Carment, 'Knight', 172.
50 Quoted in Carment et al., Territorian, 47.
51 Dewar, Inside-Out, 2. It was probably designed by O.F.C. Reichardt under instructions from G.R. McMinn, Supervisor of Works. The building contract was awarded to V.V. Brown.
52 During his term as Warden of the Goldfields in the NT (1876–80), Knight had contributed to the welfare of miners in the Yam Creek district by establishing a hospital in a former hotel, often tending to the sick himself: Carment et al., Territorian, 34, 47.
54 Ibid., 9.
55 Dewar, Inside-Out, 4. The concept of prison labour as a key tenet of punishment and a means of making recompense to society was already in place at the old Palmerston Gaol: Ibid., 156.
56 Ibid., 12. 'Knight’s Folly' burnt down in December 1933.
decision to override the ruling\textsuperscript{57} may be regarded as purely pragmatic, but his decision nevertheless offered a degree of public proof of the possibility of Aboriginal prisoners’ potential for reform and usefulness to the community. He noted:

\begin{quote}
I am going to try to build the wall of stone with prison labour; it will involve a good deal of personal trouble to teach blackfellows the rudiments of masonry, but I am not afraid of the result.\textsuperscript{58}
\end{quote}

Knight’s reputation as both Crown Prosecutor and Special Magistrate often drew comments from the press regarding his fairness and commonsense; he was sometimes criticised for his leniency, particularly in relation to Chinese and Aboriginal offenders.\textsuperscript{59} No doubt he sympathised with Justice Dashwood’s comment in 1894 that ‘it is very unsatisfactory, to…try a case against two creatures who stand there utterly ignorant of what is going on’, and with the local paper’s description of ‘the average trial of natives’ as a ‘weird farce’.\textsuperscript{60} It is understandable then, that he should turn to other means to deal with the ‘Aboriginal problem’ of over-representation in the Gaol; their reform through training in European trade work was only one possibility. Art was another. It served to demonstrate to the local community that the ‘wild savage’ was less of a threat than generally perceived. Furthermore, it offered proof that under Knight’s careful supervision, Aboriginal offenders had been sufficiently rehabilitated to produce ‘works of art’ inside the prison walls which would appeal to the informed outside.\textsuperscript{61}

We do not know whether Knight, like Geoffrey Bardon at the government settlement of Papunya nearly a century later, was alerted to the possibility of commissioning Aboriginal prisoners to use European art materials in the execution of traditional designs and motifs, as a consequence of seeing them drawing in the dust of the gaol yard. We do know, however, that some time in early 1878, when he acted as the Northern Territory’s first resident Special Commissioner to the ‘Exposition Universelle’ (Universal Exhibition) in Paris (May–November 1878), Knight requested Police Inspector Paul Foelsche\textsuperscript{62} to obtain a:

- good collection [of] native weapons, fibres, nets, bags, etc. and drawing on bark,
- also two or three skulls male and female. These are much valued by ethnologists. [my italics]\textsuperscript{63}

The date of the commission coincides with the collection of bark paintings from Port Essington, and Foelsche is known to have made at least several trips to the area at the relevant time.\textsuperscript{64} In any case, it is sufficiently clear that Knight had, for at least a decade, been aware of the artistic practices of Northern Territory Aboriginals and of the potential value of their traditional ‘drawings’ as items of interest (ethnographic or otherwise) in exhibitions. In 1887, he resumed his duties as ‘Commissioner for NT Exhibitors’ at the Adelaide Jubilee International Exhibition (1887–88),\textsuperscript{65} and was subsequently appointed ‘Commissioner Representing the Northern

\textsuperscript{57} Due to an anomaly in the South Australian legislation at the time, Knight, as Deputy-Sheriff, was answerable to the Governor of the colony of South Australia, not the Government Resident: Ibid., 12.
\textsuperscript{58} Letter, Deputy Sheriff to Government Resident, 19 Feb 1883, GRS1 193/1883, State Records of SA, Adelaide.
\textsuperscript{59} Carment et al., Territorian, 51.
\textsuperscript{60} NTTG, 10 August & 28 December, 1894.
\textsuperscript{61} Also North Australian, 31 August 1889, in relation to Wandy Wandy, who re-offended shortly after release and was eventually convicted of murder and executed in 1893.
\textsuperscript{62} Resident in Palmerston from the early 1870s and in active service until 1903, Foelsche was one of the first and most prominent collectors of natural history and Aboriginal ethnographic material at the behest of the Northern Territory Aborigines and of the potential value of their traditional ‘drawings’ as items of interest (ethnographic or otherwise) in exhibitions. In 1887, he resumed his duties as ‘Commissioner for NT Exhibitors’ at the Adelaide Jubilee International Exhibition (1887–88), and was subsequently appointed ‘Commissioner Representing the Northern
Territory’ at the Centennial International Exhibition, Melbourne (1888–89). Knight was thus well-placed to organise a special exhibit of Aboriginal art which emanated from his own domain as Deputy Sheriff, one which did not need the intermediary assistance of frontier collectors such as Foelsche.

Another impetus for Knight’s commissioning of ‘The Dawn of Art’ drawings may have been that he witnessed Aboriginal inmates using available materials to create sketches or murals on their cell walls during the 1880s. In 1886, the visiting doctor to the Gaol (Dr Wood), recorded an incident following the death of an Aboriginal inmate. One prisoner died of ‘fright’, whilst many others became ill and refused to eat. They believed that ‘the devil was in the gaol’. Wood’s written account brings to mind the Palmerston Gaol mural drawing, reproduced as a copy sketch in Worsnop’s publication, referred to earlier. Worsnop describes the mural as depicting ‘some of the representations of the mythical beings which, amphibious and otherwise, tend to raise the greatest dread in the aboriginal mind’. It may also provide a clue to the beginnings of gaol art in the Northern Territory, more specifically to Knight’s commission of drawings in 1888.

The drawings on paper were created by at least five Aboriginal prisoners incarcerated at Fannie Bay Gaol in early 1888 for various offences. They were probably first exhibited at the Centennial International Exhibition in Melbourne (1 August 1888–31 January 1889), although it has been suggested that they may have been shown in Adelaide first. The works were executed on sheets of plain paper, of roughly the same size (approximately 34 x 51 cm) in pencil and coloured pencil materials apparently supplied by Knight. For the purposes of the Melbourne Exhibition, Knight had the works framed and displayed within the Northern Territory Court, the Official Exhibition Catalogue noting:

Northern Territory of South Australia
WORKS OF ART
Class 2 — Various Paintings and Drawings

The description is significant for three reasons: it makes reference to Knight as a collector with official duties at the gaol in Palmerston, it emphasises the independent artistic capabilities of the artists, and it refers to their work as ‘art’, not artefact or ethnographic curiosity. The Dawn of Art exhibition was the first time ever that drawings on paper by Aboriginal artists were publicly exhibited.

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67 In the Preface, Worsnop acknowledges G.T. Pank Esq for many of the drawings he prepared for the lithographer, as well as ‘other drawings by contributors’: Prehistoric Arts, vii.
68 Ibid., 37.
69 See Sayers, Aboriginal Artists, Biographies, 115-116; footnotes 27, 75.
70 Personal communication from P. Jones, 27 February 2001. Also Sayers, Aboriginal Artists, 137. ‘The Dawn of Art’ collection was described by the local newspaper as an ‘additional exhibit’ for the Melbourne Exhibition, to those previously submitted by the NT to the Adelaide Jubilee Exhibition in 1887: NTGG, 23 June 1888. Part of the NT Court at the Melbourne Exhibition was subsequently displayed at the SA School of Mines, Adelaide in 1889: North Australian, 1 June 1889. Also footnote 12.
72 F.E. Becker, Keeper of Palmerston Gaol and Labour Prison, contributed a ‘collection of native weapons made by aboriginal natives in the gaol’ to the Melbourne Exhibition in 1888, for which he was awarded a bronze medal. These items were catalogued under ‘Textiles, Fabrics, Clothing and Accessories’. See Centennial International Exhibition Catalogue, Melbourne, 1888-9, Official Catalogue, I, 99-101; ‘Northern Territory of South Australia — Catalogue of Exhibits’, Item 61, The Northern Territory of South Australia — Centennial International Exhibition, Melbourne, 1888, 12.
displayed in Australia, something perhaps repeated on only one other occasion between 1888 and 1929.\textsuperscript{73}

The South Australian Museum’s collection of ‘Dawn of Art’ drawings are, according to Philip Jones, ‘reminiscent of the delicately painted rock art of the Arnhem Land region’, and in this sense may be compared to some of the earliest known bark paintings collected in North Australia during this period, referred to earlier.\textsuperscript{74} Unlike the early bark paintings, however, ‘The Dawn of Art’ drawings are not confined to a single subject or a small group of figurative images; this may suggest that Knight requested several subjects per drawing. The subject matter of the drawings chiefly consists of a wide range of animal and bird life, fish, insects, plants and fruit, as well as hunting implements and water–craft (‘tomahawk’, ‘canoe’). The repetition\textsuperscript{75} of animal motifs (such as a series of kangaroos) and their schematic portrayal as quarry lain on a flat surface before butchering, is also typical of the rock art and bark painting style of Western Arnhem Land. So too is the compositional placement of the figures. They are not grounded in perspectival space, but ‘float’, like the abstract motifs in the style of Paul Klee, forcing us to adjust our vision within the confines of the paper. Although animals’ body parts are decorated realistically or abstractly, there is no recognisable rarrk or cross–hatching to indicate possible references to the subjects’ mythological significance. There is one drawing of men in a canoe, and more significantly, two drawings of men adorned for ceremony, with details of body painting and ceremonial garb. One drawing by Billiamook depicts an ‘ancestor figure’ with a trunk–like torso from which other figures emerge. Knight’s annotation for this figure is ‘God’.

It is not known whether the artists drew the works in isolation, or in the company of other artists; nor is it known whether they were responding to particular requests for subject matter made by Knight. In anticipation of their public display, Knight carefully annotated the names of each of the subjects in the artists’ language, also adding a European approximation. In his study of the drawings, Sayers states, somewhat sweepingly, that they have no ‘apparent narrative intent’, but are more akin to ‘descriptive, informal collections of objects’, and further that:

they have none of the sense of pattern inherent in twentieth-century works which explicitly illustrate Dreaming stories and reflect the cohesiveness of an Aboriginal world–view.\textsuperscript{76}

It is not surprising that, in the context of Fannie Bay Gaol, the drawings may appear to lack a ‘cohesive Aboriginal world–view’ — in the nineteenth century, this ‘world view’ was under siege, and it is a testament to Aboriginal resilience and determination that it has survived and continues to be expressed through their art. A failure to understand (rather than appreciate) ‘The Dawn of Art’ drawings, may at least be partly due to the fact that the subject matter of Aboriginal art, no matter how carefully explained in anthropological terms, is sometimes simply beyond non-Indigenous Australians.

In a letter reporting on the success and acclaim which the Northern Territory display attracted at the Melbourne Exhibition, published in the local newspaper in 1888, Knight noted:

As I predicted the drawings made by Billamuc [sic], Davey, Jemmy Miller, Paddy, Wandy, and other native artists attract almost undue attention, especially from real artists. The other evening Mr Folingsby, a painter of some renown, after careful inspection of these original works, declared that the executants were all worthy of being made honorary members of the Australian Academy of Arts. I have had the sketches mounted, and put into six frames, each 6 ft by 2 ft 6 in, with six pictures in a frame. [my italics]\textsuperscript{77}

\textsuperscript{73} Sayers, \textit{Aboriginal Artists}, 81, 85.

\textsuperscript{74} Jones, ‘Perceptions’, 166

\textsuperscript{75} Repetition of figurative images (of animals) in some examples of Aboriginal art is sometimes thought to indicate that the artist is a young initiate and is practising in order to refine the ‘correct’ and appropriate way to depict a subject.

\textsuperscript{76} Sayers, \textit{Aboriginal Artists}, 81-82.

\textsuperscript{77} NTTG 20 October 1888.
Ever the exhibition impresario, Knight went to particular trouble to promote his collection of drawings as being unique in aesthetic terms, thereby defending his description for them. A report in the Argus in 1892 recalls Knight ‘enlarging with quaint humour upon his pictorial exhibits’ which illustrated ‘what he called “The Dawn of Art”’. The writer continues:

With a merry twinkle in his eye, and selecting the worst effort of the whole, he exclaimed, parodying the lines of Gray —

‘Let not the critic mock their art grotesque,
Their pigments few and drawing incorrect;
I tell you that this work is picturesque,
And for it, praise unstinted I expect’.78

It is apparent from Knight’s letter of 20 October 1888 that the eighteen drawings which found their way into the South Australian Museum are only half the number he exhibited in Melbourne in 1888. According to the local newspaper, Knight sent ‘some of the framed pictures executed by aboriginals at the Fannie Bay Gaol’ to the ‘Hamburg Exhibition’ at the close of the Melbourne Exhibition in 1889.79 The writer continues:

one collection of pictures, by the aborigines, has been presented to Mr Grimwood, the Commissioner for Lancashire, who has had them photographed on slides, for the purpose of illustrating a series of lectures to be delivered in England.80

It would appear that six drawings by Paddy, Billy Muck (Billiamook) and Jemmy Miller, mounted as a set in their original frame, remained in Victoria. They are now located in the collections of Museum Victoria, having been transferred from the Zoology Department of The University of Melbourne in 1929, possibly in response to the Primitive Art exhibition at the Museum the same year.81

On his return to Palmerston in early 1889, Knight was appointed Acting Government Resident and Judge, and was subsequently formally appointed Government Resident.82 In May 1890, he held a ‘Conversazione and Exhibition of Minerals’ at the Residency, which included ‘the display of drawings made by aboriginals of the Northern Territory’, described by the local newspaper reporter as ‘an unique feature of the collection of novelties’ which Knight made available for inspection to his guests.83 The reporter continues:

These naturally provoked much comment, and if it were possible to pass an opinion on such artistical ravings without having the slightest idea what many of them were intended to represent, the popular verdict would be that the nigger possesses a vast deal more genius than he is credited with. Four large drawings — three representing steamers, and the fourth a couple of yachts under sail — were exceptionally good works of aboriginal art, executed by a member of the Larrakeyah tribe who has had the advantage of a Sydney Harbour experience. His forte is of the maritime order, and in this, with the assistance of a teacher, he might blossom into a thorough native artist.84

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78 Argus, 12 January 1892. This extract appears in Knight’s obituary. The reference to (Thomas) Gray may refer to lines 29-32 from ‘Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard’.
79 NTTG, 30 March 1889. I have found no record of an international exhibition in Hamburg after 1888; perhaps the reporter was referring to a public institution in that city.
80 Ibid.
81 Personal communication with L. Allen, Senior Curator, Indigenous Cultures Department, Museum Victoria, 5 September 2001. Cf. p.5 of this paper.
82 Carment, ‘Knight’, 172.
83 NTTG, 16 May 1890. Alfred Searcy (Sub-Collector of Customs, Port Darwin) was a guest at the Conversazione. He collected the drawings of Aboriginal prison artist Charlie Flannigan (now in the South Australian Museum collection), who was executed at Fannie Bay Gaol in 1893. See Sayers, Aboriginal Artists, 136; E. Whittington, Preface, in A. Searcy, In Australian Tropics, 1909, (facsimile edition), (Perth: Hesperian Press, 1984), ix.
84 Ibid. Five Larrakia Aborigines were taken to Sydney by a Mr Stockdale in 1889, ‘for show purposes’ as
Had Knight made much progress in convincing the Palmerston community that Aboriginal art, as art, was worth patronage and support? How far had he come in promoting the concept that as artists, rather than as the objects of scientific study or a potential menace to civic order, Aborigines could be said to be endowed with universal human qualities and were therefore capable of ‘reform’? It is hard to say, but it would appear that he had at least tried. By offering an opportunity for Aboriginal prisoners to engage in artistic practice within the regime of penal servitude at Fannie Bay Gaol, Knight demonstrated considerable foresight. It was a policy which did not receive official attention within the prison system in the Northern Territory until many years later.

Following his many successes in the 1880s as exhibition organiser on behalf of the Northern Territory, Knight took steps to form a permanent museum in Palmerston, to be located at his residence on the harbour. His plans were brought to an abrupt end by his death in early 1892, and the idea of a Palmerston museum appears to have languished until 1903. It was during this period that ‘The Dawn of Art’ collection of drawings and other examples of nineteenth-century Palmerston prison art probably found their way into established collecting institutions or private collections in South Australia and abroad. Today, Fannie Bay Gaol operates as a museum and open–air venue, and copies of the original ‘Dawn of Art’ drawings are permanently exhibited in what was the gaol’s maximum security section. In a sense, the drawings are back where they started, but the distinction between ‘inside’ and ‘outside’, which once defined the institution as a gaol, has collapsed. At the centre of this dynamic shift of social spaces, Knight and ‘The Dawn of Art’ collection of drawings play an enduring role. Today, as in 1888, they have an audience to whom they communicate over distance and time.

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‘curiosities’: North Australian, 10 August 1889.

85 See the particularly vitriolic attacks in the NTTG (Editorial) concerning the removal of several ‘serious’ Aboriginal offenders to Adelaide Gaol in late 1886 for reasons of security: 16 October 1886; 1 January 1887. It was even suggested that the gallows from Fannie Bay Gaol be displayed at the Adelaide Jubilee Exhibition in 1887. Was Knight’s commissioning of ‘The Dawn of Art’ drawings a response to this? Also Dewar, Inside-Out, 16.

86 Anita Angel, ‘Collecting and Exhibiting the Northern Territory: Retracing a Museum History on the Frontier from pre-Federation to the early twentieth century’ (unpublished manuscript), Historical Society of the NT, Centenary of Federation publication (in press), 2001, 29–30; NTTG 6 June and 29 August, 1890; 11 September 1903.
Figure 1: PADDY (Mindilpildil), *Fish, Ibis, tomahawk & shark* (pencil, coloured pencil: 34 x 50.8 cm), South Australian Museum Archives (AA169) (no. 14).

Figure 2: PADDY (Mindilpildil), *Black fellows, divers* (pencil, coloured pencil: 34 x 50.8 cm), South Australian Museum Archives (AA169) (no. 15).
Figure 3: JEMMY MILLER (Jimmy Miller; Ilon–Tereba), Wuwulan, Mary River–Sth Alligator River region, b.c.1851. *Dingo, Native dog, kangaroo rats, sharks* (pencil, coloured pencil: 34 x 50.8 cm), South Australian Museum Archives (AA169) (no. 7).

Figure 4: JEMMY MILLER (Jimmy Miller; Ilon–Tereba Wuwulan, Mary River–Sth Alligator River region, b.c.1851. *Native companions* (pencil, coloured pencil: 33.6 x 50.7 cm), South Australian Museum Archives (AA169) (no. 9).
Figure 5: BILLIAMOOK (Billy Muck; Gapal), Larrakia, b.c.1853. *God, tree* (pencil, coloured pencil: 34 x 50.8 cm), South Australian Museum Archives (AA169) (no. 2).

Figure 6: ARTIST UNKNOWN, Copies of figures and drawings by a native prisoner on the walls of Palmerston Gaol, NT, from the estate of Thomas Worsnop (one sheet) (55 x 33.7 cm), South Australian Museum Archives (AA169) (no. 19).