THE SHAMEFUL ISLES

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THE SHAMEFUL ISLES

THE TRUE STORY OF NORTH-WEST AUSTRALIA'S FATAL EXPERIMENT WITH MEDICAL APARTHEID

DAVID PRICE

FREMANTLE PRESS

DAVID PRICE is a Western Australian educator and writer who grew up in the small northwest town of Carnarvon. His first book, *Dark Tales from the Long River,* was published by Fremantle Press in 2020 and explored some lesser-known and sadder historical events of the Gascoyne and Murchison Regions. Now living in Perth, David continues to be intrigued by the unspoken history of his home state and committed to bringing sometimes uncomfortable truths into the light.

Dedicated to the memory of my parents,
Bob and Lyn Price

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A NOTE ON THE TEXT

This is a work of narrative non-fiction sourced from an array of historical and contemporary sources. While all the major events depicted in this narrative did take place, I have occasionally exercised creative licence in their description so as to bring them to life for the reader and to do justice to their impact.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders are respectfully advised that this book contains the names and images of people who have died, the reproduction of historical quotes that are deeply offensive in nature, and descriptions of medical, physical, sexual and emotional abuse.

FOREWORD

> I profoundly reject the black armband view of Australian history. I believe the balance sheet of Australian history is a very generous and benign one. I believe that, like any other nation, we have black marks upon our history but amongst the nations of the world we have a remarkably positive history. I think there is a yearning in the Australian community right across the political divide for its leader to enunciate more pride and sense of achievement in what has gone before us. I think we have been too apologetic about our history in the past. I believe it is tremendously important, particularly as we approach the centenary of the Federation of Australia, that the Australian achievement has been a heroic one, a courageous one and a humanitarian one.
>
> ~ Prime Minister of Australia John Howard, 1996

Heroic. Courageous. Humanitarian. Generous. Benign.

It seemed to me as I wrote this history of Western Australia's Aboriginal lock hospitals that the partisan white lens through which many would like to view Australian history is largely founded on three prevailing misconceptions: firstly, that today's Australians cannot feel responsibility for the acts of previous

generations of Australians; secondly, that the values of a past time cannot be critiqued through the lens of modern values. The final misconception is that there exists in our national discourse a subversive 'black armband'[1] view of history that cherrypicks the worst of our racial narrative while overlooking the benefits brought by white people to the peoples of the First Nations.

Like all good lies, these viewpoints are sprinkled with grains of fact. But they should not be confused with the truth. Australians, like all peoples, can be open-hearted but they can also be mean-spirited; they are capable of behaviours that are both kind and cruel; they can show themselves to be brave in many things and cowardly in others. That our country and its history are all of these things is not startling – that is the history of all nations. What can make us truly heroic, courageous and generous is our willingness to own the whole truth about ourselves, even when that truth hurts. To do that we must tell all the stories of our past, good and bad. If we don't, then we are in danger of becoming little more than drunks at the bar: a small, angry people with loud voices and grand delusions.

Let's start with the myth of our non-culpability for the past acts of others. We Australians express profound pride in the experiences of our white ancestors, most prominently through our celebration of the Anzacs. We see no irony in annually parading the vicarious self-regard that stems from the events at Gallipoli in which we personally and as a modern community had no part. If we, as a people, can take pride and meaning from the more admirable moments of our country's past, then it is arguable that some of the ignominies of those times can also be a source of sorrow and regret. Approaching our history with a more balanced scorecard is not an expression of guilt but simply a product of mature and truthful national reflection.

Then there is the oft-repeated argument that we cannot judge the past by the standards of the present. Such a view presumes that our notions of right and wrong have somehow shifted over the centuries when, in fact, moral standards have been fairly consistent with – and predate the existence of – the Ten Commandments and similar religious precepts in most cultures and over most of recorded history. We should not fall back on the argument of 'different times, different values' to excuse the excesses of British colonisation as if they were some universally accepted social norms particular to the era. I have tried to show, through the commentary extant at the time of the events of this book, that there was no unimpeachable moral unanimity in settler society, no single set of values any more or less than there are today. The record shows that there were voices for both good and evil in the treatment of Aboriginal people and that the crimes committed in the name of 'settlement' were done with full knowledge of their impact and unfairness by politicians, priests, public servants and the press.

Finally, let's look more closely at the assertion that current interpretations of our colonial history overlook the many acts of goodwill by white people towards First Nations peoples. This book reveals that such acts took place – by everyday colonists, policemen, politicians and pastoralists – but they were almost invariably noble attempts to ameliorate the effects of ignoble acts. The lock hospitals of Western Australia are, in themselves, perfect examples of this phenomenon. While they genuinely attempted to address the scourge of venereal disease, that plague was in itself merely the by-product of a systematic regime of exploitative immorality perpetrated by a foreign empire that brought murder, theft, slavery and sexual abuse to all corners of the planet. It would prove cold comfort for the victims of such violence to find their wounds tended by their assailants. It may be more galling to find

such ministrations held up even today as grounds for the victims' gratitude.

I have tried to let this story tell itself mainly through the contemporaneous voices of the times. My main aim has been to join these together in a logical chronology and add sufficient commentary to bind them into one narrative, to allow the reader to experience something of the tenor of the times, rather than merely have them mediated through me. Not surprisingly, the nature of the historical sources available means that the voices are overwhelmingly white and much of the silences are black. But even that silence is worth hearing.

David Price
Perth 2024

PROLOGUE
WHEN THE WORLD WAS SOFT

NGURRU NYUJUNNGGAMA

The stories of the Yindjibarndi people[2] tell of the time before the beginning, when the sky was low and all things were water and everything was the ocean. Then there rose the Marrga, the spirits of creation, to lift the blue and black sky and then to raise the great world of stone and sand and trees from the depths of the seas. They say that the Marrga then formed the hills and valleys and rivers of that country, then they brought forth every bird and animal on the earth and named each and every one. When the land was ready and the animals walked and crawled and leapt across its skin, the spirits created the Ngaardangarli, the people of that country. This story is called the Ngurru Nyujunnggama, which means 'when the world was soft'. The Yindjibarndi say that the spirits are still in that country and the mist is the smoke from their fires.[3]

LET DRY GROUND APPEAR

The white people who later came to the ancient places of the Ngaardangarli also told stories of the time before the land came.

This is how they told that story to their children: 'Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters … And God said, "Let the water under the sky be gathered to one place, and let dry ground appear." And it was so.'[4]

THEN IN THE WEST

And it came to pass, when the Ngaardangarli and many other nations had lived in that land for five hundred centuries, that their country began to shrink. The seas rose and the people moved back from that which had become soft to that which was not. In the oceans of that vast place, now far from the view of the Ngaardangarli and their memories, the last high remnants of the flooded plains formed salt-sprayed ragged islands. There they lay on the great waters like empty outposts on the deserts of a vanquished and forgotten empire. A thousand years passed. Then passed seven thousand more. And the silent islands lay there, at rest in a bed of sky and sea.

PART ONE
THE RAVAGING
1800—1900

Certainly in no one of the Australian colonies has the same care been bestowed on the Aborigines as in this, and as a consequence in none have they remained so peaceable and well inclined. We know of no point in our colonial polity to which we may refer with greater pride, than to the zeal and attention which have of late years characterised the management of the natives rendering them useful servants and allies of the white settlers instead of the turbulent and mischievous people they have been found elsewhere.

~ *The Inquirer* (Perth) newspaper[5], 1843

CHAPTER ONE
THE COMING OF THE SHIPS

In the winter of 1801, the French corvette *Geographe* comes creaking and groaning into view, its sails pregnant with the salt-mired breezes of the Indian Ocean. It lurches into the troughs of a heaving swell that bullies it towards two small islands flecking faintly in the shimmering line between sky and sea. On the quarterdeck, the captain stands motionless, clutching a wooden rail and frowning. Now into the ninth month of his scientific expedition to Terra Australis, Nicolas Baudin looks older than his years, made wiser from experience but harder from its fruits.

As the two thin slivers of land take shape, Baudin watches with mild disdain the growing excitement of the scientists, artists and officers on the deck below. He suffers their animation with a combination of contempt and envy. Not one of them looks up at him. Or to him. There is little love lost between the master and the men. The voyage has been bruised by hardship, and Baudin has become impatient with his ill-disciplined passengers and weary of their demands and complaints. Below deck he is spoken of with bitterness, above deck they curse and spit into the sea, angry at his aloof stubbornness and fearful of his vindictiveness.[6]

The *Geographe* has been sailing alone for days now since its sister ship, *Naturaliste,* disappeared in stormy weather somewhere south of Rottnest Island. There is no way of knowing if its captain, Jacques Hamelin, and his crew are dead or alive or if, somehow, they can rendezvous at the desolate place now breaching the horizon.

Baudin watches as the two slender, godforsaken, sunbaked excuses for islands slowly rise and fall from his view. At first sight, nothing about them softens his early impressions of this north-west corner of New Holland as little more than 'a low, barren, dreary and sandy shore, affording little interesting either in the animal, mineral or vegetable creation.'[7]

Still, here they are, and here they must wait. The crew and scientists spend the sunlight hours exploring their surroundings and hoping against hope for the arrival of *Naturaliste*. Each expedition ashore is led by the scientist, François Péron,[8] who, like his colleagues, simmers with barely feigned contempt for his commander. The feeling is mutual. Baudin considers Péron to be 'the most thoughtless and most wanting in foresight of everyone on board.'[9]

For Péron, the sojourn offers welcome relief from his cramped quarters and his sullen leader. While he has been as disappointed as Baudin at the 'dismal sterility of the continent and isles',[10] he is soon surprised by the unexpected variety of flora and fauna on the two modest islands. Baudin also finds himself excited by the array of plants and animals found there, including 'twelve or fifteen new kind of plants, two very handsome lizards and seven birds, two of which are particularly remarkable for the beauty of their plumage'.[11]

The days blend seamlessly into one another, the thrall of new discoveries temporarily diluting months of pent-up frustration. Even so, Baudin continues to scan the horizon for the sign of white sails. The want of a water supply on the islands is feeding a growing

anxiety. In early July, when there is still no sign of Captain Hamelin, the *Geographe* weighs anchor and steers north towards Java. Four days later, *Naturaliste* arrives at the now abandoned islands. It will be September before the two ships reunite in Timor.

Before leaving, Baudin names the more northern of the two isles after the expedition's astronomer, Pierre Bernier. If the young man appreciates the gesture, it doesn't show; like many of the scientific crew, he holds serious misgivings about his commander, finding him 'serious, and solitary, repulsing everybody with his brusque and rude manners'.[12] Perhaps Baudin is unaware of the astronomer's personal feelings towards him, or perhaps he is punishing him for holding them. He has no need to name the southern isle after friend or foe; the Dutch seafaring captain and explorer Willem de Vlaming had called it Dorre a hundred years before.[13]

Neither Baudin nor the young man after whom he names the desolate island off Western Australia will survive the *Geographe*'s voyage. On 6 June 1803, en route from Timor to France, Pierre Bernier dies and is buried at sea. Even Baudin seems shaken by the loss. In the evening, he writes in his journal:

> This death, which one can almost regard as a sudden one, made such an impression upon me that it would be difficult to express all that I suffered. The loss of Citizen Bernier is an unhappy event, not only for us, but also for the government … This young man was of a gentle and honest nature … I do not hesitate to say that of all of the scientists given me, it was he who worked the most …[14]

In the months following Bernier's death, Baudin himself is now plagued by persistent coughing and breathlessness. Feverish days steadily begin to narrow and blur. All things have become one thing; night and day, dreams and waking have become a kaleidoscope of salt and sailors' curses, slapping sails and shoreless seas.

As the ships edge towards Africa, Baudin's cough has become a wet, hacking bark, and the captain is fighting for his life. He is forty-nine when, on the island of Mauritius, he dies of tuberculosis in September 1803. His comrades bury him on the island.

Then they spend the next twenty years burying his reputation.

THE PALE LIEUTENANT AND THE BEINGS FROM ANOTHER WORLD

The islands are patient. Nearly four more decades pass until, one windy morning in February 1839, an American whaling ship, the 300-tonne *Russell,* rounds the northern end of Bernier Island.

The captain, George Long, squints at the low clouds streaking by beneath a high, grey sky. No one watching would know it – he makes sure of that – but his seafaring intuition is working overtime. His ears are attuned to the groaning of the masts, the smacking of water on wood, the slap of wind in a loose sail. Even the tone and frequency of his crew's cursing is like a barometer to George Long. He knows the mercury is falling and he notices that the swell, which he judges to be about five seconds apart, is gradually becoming harder to discern as the wind drives up its own waves and daubs the sea's surface with whitecaps.

This business is best done quickly, he thinks. *Offload these mad bastards and turn the good ship and crew southwards. Always two sorts of men in these godforsaken places*, Long reflects, *those searching for gold and those searching for glory*. Still, he is happy to take their money. He looks at the young British officer pacing the deck, one eye on the islands, the other on his place in history. The captain has met the likes of Lieutenant George Grey before; just one more of those namers and claimers of the Empire, acting like nothing is known, nothing is owned, and nothing is or was before them. The master snorts quietly then bellows an order. There is no

need to be here for the arrival of the storm that lies somewhere over the slowly bruising horizon. Captain Long scans the cliffs and beaches for a safe landing.

Luck is going the *Russell*'s way. By noon the ship's boats are offloading twelve men and five months' supplies on the sands of a small, reef-sheltered bay. Grey's expedition intends to use the island as a secure depot while the men explore the coast between North West Cape and Gantheaume Bay. The 27-year-old lieutenant has heard stories of an inland sea that is said to lie at the heart of Australia. He dreams that he will be first to find a river that leads there.

By early afternoon, with the stores and explorers ashore, the *Russell* turns its back on the expeditioners and is soon disappearing over the horizon. While his men secure their supplies and set up camp, Grey walks off across Bernier Island to look for water. He takes with him the surgeon, Mr Walker, and a Whadjuk Noongar man from the Swan River named Kaiber. Their search proves fruitless, and attempts to dig a well quickly flounder on the hard rock below the sand. On the beach, the men have built a fire and are making soup of three killed turtles.[15]

That night, the wind continues unabated, and the men, with their bellies full and bodies aching from their exertions, watch as the colour bleaches from the island and a sliver of moon rises into the purple sky. Their leader hunches over his journal and, in the light of the campfire, writes his first impressions of their landfall:

> Bernier Island consists of recent limestone of a reddish tinge, containing many recent fossil shells, and having a coating of sand and sandy dunes which are arranged in right lines, lying south-east and north-west, the direction of the prevailing winds. The island does not afford a tree or a blade of grass, but only wretched scrubby

> bushes. Between the dunes regular beds of shells are forming which, when dried and light, are drifted up by the wind. The only animals we saw were kangaroo-rats, one pigeon … and many seabirds, a few lizards, mosquitoes, ants, crabs, oysters and turtle.[16]

There is food aplenty but no water save salt water, no moisture but the dew, no streams but piss. Two days of fruitless searching and digging pass before Grey orders the launch of three boats into the narrow, heaving passage that separates them from Dorre Island. Maybe there they will find water. The wind is now constantly assailing them, and the restless ocean seems to know something they don't, seems to be warning them to go back. Close to shore, the violent surf upturns the first boat, casting the crew onto the sands of Dorre, where they crawl to safety and watch the craft split apart in the waves. Then they are yelling, cursing, scrambling for the supplies already being sucked into deeper waters. The other two boats land quickly and safely and are dragged desperately from the reach of the sea's fingers.

The search begins immediately for water, but only tiny quantities can be sucked from small pools in the rocks. 'The new island has little to distinguish itself from its neighbour,' writes George Grey dispiritedly in his journal, 'except that the land is slightly higher than that on Bernier from which it is separated by reefs and wildly tossing seas'.[17]

That night, the cyclone that has been gathering sullenly on the horizon arrives fully enraged. Winds howl at the crew in the darkness, take pause in the morning as the eye passes over, and then return, cursing the men angrily into the afternoon. When the gale subsides, the sailors find their boats no longer seaworthy and more of their precious stores, including water, lost or spread far and wide along the shore. For three days, haunted by the spectre

of a thirsty death, the sun-seared men work desperately to repair the boats. On the third day of March, they point the salvaged boats towards the mainland where Lieutenant Grey, alerted by debris washed up on the landward side of the island, suspects a river might lie. In the late afternoon, the explorers finally make landfall among the creeks and mud and sandflies of the mangrove-strewn shore.

Night comes in quickly and the men camp on the edges of a shrubby plain turned blue in the moonlight; they fall asleep to the sound of faint splashes from the creeks and the buzz of mosquitoes. In the morning, they trudge northwards seeking the river of Grey's imagination. It arrives to the men's view slowly: a wide, sandy estuary separated by two low-lying, scrub-covered islands. There are tidal shallows where pelicans drift, occasional waterholes fringed by gum trees that are filled with the loud chatter of white cockatoos. They are in the country of the Yinggarda, a place those people call Kuwinwardu, the neck of the sea. George Grey has no interest in what the Yinggarda call the river. He promptly renames it in honour of his friend, the estimable John Gascoyne, recently of Her Majesty's navy.

The Yinggarda may be unaware that their land now has a different name but Grey feels sure that they know he is there. In the dark hours especially, he waits for them nervously. But no one comes. It is four days before he notices that two dark figures are watching the expedition from the banks of the river, gesticulating wildly as if to exorcise these white apparitions from their land. When Grey orders his crew closer to shore, the Yinggarda men begin yelling at them while moving slowly to the top of a small hillock.

The lieutenant turns to the Noongar man beside him. 'Kaiber, remove your clothes. Stand up, man! Let them see you!' The naked Kaiber calls to the men, but they only renew their hostility. He

turns to Grey. 'Weak ears have they and wooden foreheads; they do not understand the southern language.'[18] Then he reluctantly wades towards the riverbank, where he waits nervously as the two tribesmen, equally apprehensive, cautiously approach him.

When it appears safe, Grey leaves the boat and comes towards the small group with handfuls of damper and pork. Although neither of the Yinggarda men shift ground, they remain deeply unnerved by this white apparition bearing strange gifts. Nothing Grey says or does can induce them to take his hand or touch him. Later that night, Grey records his impressions of the meeting by the river:

> For a time, they were nearly unintelligible to Kaiber and myself, but as they gained confidence, I found that they spoke a dialect very closely resembling that of the natives to the north of the Swan River. They addressed many questions to us, such as, whence we had come? where we were going to? was the boat a dead tree? but they evaded giving any direct answers to our questions. Being anxious to start I now left them to bear to their companions the strange food I had bestowed, and to recount to eager listeners the mysterious tale of their interview with beings from another world, and who were of an unknown form and colour.[19]

As the boat pulls out into the still waters of the river, Kaiber clambers aboard and sits dripping, watching intently as the dark-skinned men disappear into the trees. Then it is as if no one was ever there. Even the cockatoos have gone. And so it is that the white men, the Noongar man and the Yinggarda people part ways, each filled with equal wonder at the existence of the other.

INTERLUDE

After Grey's departure, there are few who think about the two thin shards of sun-bleached calcareous dunes and, if they do, they don't

care to visit them. Those islands are not the tropical islands of idle dreamers. Coarse grassland stretches to the shoreline, blanketing the quartz and windblown shell that has been pulverised into limestone just below the surface. Those islands are places of spinifex, mallee and melaleuca, dotted with thickets of acacia shrubs and occasionally broken by a rocky outcrop or a clump of woody-based samphire.[20]

There is other life on those islands, but almost never is there anyone to see it. A colony of hare-wallabies survive there while their ancestors on the mainland fade away. The mouse-like djoongari lives among the sand dunes and shares them with rat-like burrowing bettongs and some western barred bandicoots. There are birds too, many of them migratory, that make the islands home. Sometimes a dugong passes by, at other times, a pod of humpback whales. Inscrutable faces of loggerhead turtles bob to the surface, staring blankly at the white-crested seas.

Sails appear and disappear. Those lonesome places are not made for people. Still, people come to all places eventually. In the 1860s, the explorer Brockman tries his hand at grazing on Bernier until the day his campfire gets away from him and burns half the hillsides back to sand. Later, the sandalwood cutters come briefly to take the islands' scented wood to India. But by the time of this story, those ancient ocean outcrops are just some lines on the maps of white people.