FEASTS OF THE FULL-MOON

The Distribution of rations to Aborigines in South Australia: 1836-1861

Robert Foster

Introduction

In this paper I examine the origins and development of ration distributions to the Aborigines of South Australia. The distribution of rations was the principal administrative operation of the Protector's Office and the depots, usually police stations, were the medium through which government policy was communicated and carried out. While originally conceived as a form of compensation, the Colonial Government, under Governor Grey's influence, came to use the distribution of rations as a means of gaining control over the Aborigines on the frontiers of pastoral settlement. At the end of the 1850s, as a consequence of destitution and ill-health among the Aborigines in the settled regions of the state, rations were also used as a form of social welfare.

1. Policy and Precedent

The first report of the Australian Colonization Commission contained a plan for the treatment of Aborigines which included an embryonic notion of ration distributions:

the following objects should be aimed at: to guard against personal outrage and violence; to protect them in the undisturbed enjoyment of their proprietary right to the soil, wherever such right may be found to exist; to make it an invariable and cardinal condition in all bargains and treaties made with the natives for the cession of lands possessed by them, in occupation or enjoyment, that permanent subsistence shall be supplied to them from some other source.¹

The report also contained a proposal to set up 'asylums' in districts inhabited by the Aborigines. These asylums were to provide shelter for the Aborigines "superior to those found in their rudely constructed huts", and they were to be locations from which food and clothing would be distributed "in exchange for an equivalent in the form of labour."² By this arrangement, Aborigines were to be "reconciled to labour for the sake of its reward" and trained in "habits of useful industry."³ The policy was paternalistic in conception and motivated, in part, by the desire to draw Aborigines into the labour force. During the early years of settlement, frontier violence and indifference to the settlers' notions of 'useful industry' seemed to thwart these plans, however the network of ration depots established in the 1840s does seem to have drawn its inspiration from the original idea of asylums.

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¹ 1st Annual Report of the Colonization Commissioners of South Australia 28 July 1836, in *British Parliamentary Papers*, XXXVI:8.

² *ibid*:9.

³ *ibid*.

Ration distribution points, South Australia [Cartographic unit, RSPacS]

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The earliest distributions of rations, carried out by the interim Protector Captain Bromley, were haphazard and gratuitous, intended only to gain the confidence of the Aborigines in and around the environs of Adelaide. The plan of giving food or clothing only in return for labour was forgotten. Bromley did little in his short term as Protector beside perfecting a recipe for inedible porridge - the Adelaide tribe's dislike of which almost drove him to a nervous breakdown.⁴ After only two months in office, Bromley was replaced by William Wyatt. Both Wyatt, and the first full-time Protector, Matthew Moorhouse, attempted to re-establish the distributions according to the original conception. To Moorhouse's way of thinking gratuitous distributions were counter-productive, encouraging indolence rather than work. His first report, published in September 1839, explained his attitude:

At the location we never distribute rations until an equivalent of work is done, and then the food is of an inferior quality to that obtained from the town. Bread, for instance, is preferred much before biscuit, and fresh meat before salt; and unless the number of natives be so great that the town cannot supply them, we get no work done at the location.⁵

The concept of giving rations only on the condition of work performed was persisted with in Adelaide and at the first depots established, such as Moorundie, but it never really worked.⁶ The reason is that in the early phase of contact the Aborigines saw rations as a novelty rather than a necessity - if need be, they could do without them - they consequently had little coercive effect. What is more important, however, is that when systematic distributions from local depots was begun, a new motive had emerged; besides being used as inducements to labour, rations became a tool for controlling frontier conflict. This theme will be explored later.

In November 1838, to celebrate his arrival in the Colony, Governor Gawler held a feast for the Aborigines of Adelaide. Gawler's wife, Maria, described the scene -

. . . at 12 o'clock, the interpreter (Cronck), and Dr Wyatt, the pro-tem Protector, went to their settlement, and paraded them down, the men dressed in new red woolen shirts, & the women as well as they could.

They formed in a ring and the Governor addressed them, Cronck interpreting. They afterwards all sat on the grass, and were well regaled with baked beef, biscuit, rice and sugar, and tea.⁷

The feasting culminated in a corroboree performed for the Europeans. The interpreter translated the songs for the Governor and his wife; they apparently included references to the arrival of the first ship in Holdfast Bay, the landing of the whites, and one even sang the praises of "the good biscuit they got in Adelaide, etc."⁸

Using his 'welcoming party' as a model, Gawler instituted an annual feast for the

4 Kathleen Hassell, *The Relations between the settlers and Aborigines in South Australia, 1836-1860*, :19-22. Also the Colonial Secretary's Office In Letters, Nos. 117, 152, 169, 206, 210/1837. SA Public Record Office GRG 24/1.

5 Protector's Report (9 Oct.1839) reprinted in the 5th Annual Report of the Colonization Commissioners of South Australia, *British Parliamentary Papers* (1842), :321.

6 Report of E. Eyre, Colonial Secretary's Office, In letters, 28 February 1844. SA Public Record Office GRG 24/6.

7 Letter of Maria Gawler, 1 Nov. 1838, in Papers of the Gawler Family, SA Archives PRG 50/19.

8 *ibid.*

Above: Edward John Eyre distributing rations at Moorundie. Reproduced from F. Dutton, *South Australia and its mines*, London, 1946: opp. 331, by permission of the State Library of South Australia.

Below: Edward Bates Scott, successor to Eyre at Moorundie, where he was Sub-Protector from 1847 to 1856, reproduced by permission of the State Library of South Australia.

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Aborigines to coincide with the Queen's Birthday on the 24th of May. The first was held in 1839 and was attended by the Aborigines of Adelaide and the Para River.⁹ It became customary for the Governor to address the assembly before the feasting began; in 1840 they were made to listen to a translation, in the Kaurna tongue, of the Ten Commandments, followed by the Governor's own commandments which culminated in a plea for brotherly love between the races.¹⁰ During the feast, goods of various sorts were distributed: blankets, clothing, tin dishes and cups, even pewter plates with an impress of the Queen and the letters of the alphabet. The annual gathering was also an arena in which the progress of the children at the Native School could be assessed - they were usually brought forth to demonstrate their skills in reading and writing.¹¹

The idea for annual feasts of this sort was not new; in New South Wales Governor Macquarie began the practice of giving an annual feast for the Aborigines at Parramatta in 1814. The gathering was held every December, with some variations over the years, until its abolition in 1835. The conduct of these yearly gatherings at Parramatta, which involved the distribution of food and blankets, the imparting of government instructions and displays of children from the Native School, probably set the pattern for Gawler's own annual feast.¹²

The Queen's Birthday distribution represents the earliest form of systematic ration distribution in South Australia. Its purpose was simple; it was a means of gaining the confidence of the Aborigines and was a useful vehicle for communicating government instructions. As the Protector wrote of the first distribution: "Beef and pudding, blankets and clothing were convincing and tangible inducements to loyalty."¹³

2. The Establishment of Systematic Distribution.

(i) Moorundie and Port Lincoln.

When George Grey arrived to replace Governor Gawler in June 1841 relations between Aborigines and settlers had reached their lowest ebb, the cause being the constant clashes between Aborigines and overlanders droving sheep down the Murray River from New South Wales to Adelaide.¹⁴ The Colony was almost bankrupt and any threat to the overland route threatened the financial viability of the Colony.

In an effort to secure the route a number of expeditions under the command of Police Commissioner O'Halloran were organized to protect the over-landing parties. The unexpected arrival of Governor Grey led to the recall of the second expedition and its re-organisation; it was placed under the command of Matthew Moorhouse whose instructions were to capture Aboriginal leaders and bring them back to Adelaide for trial. The expedition was met by a large party of Aborigines and in the ensuing conflict at least thirty, but perhaps as many as fifty, Aborigines were killed. An official enquiry into the "Rufus River

⁹ *The Register*, 3 Nov. 1838.

¹⁰ *The Southern Australian*, 26 May 1840 (3A).

¹¹ *ibid.*

¹² R.H.W. Reece, 'Feasts and Blankets: The history of some early attempts to establish relations with the Aborigines of New South Wales, 1814-1846', *Archaeology and Physical Anthropology in Oceania*, 2, 3 October 1967.

¹³ Protector's Report, published in *The Register*, 25 May 1839.

¹⁴ S. Hemming, 'Conflict Between Aborigines and Europeans along the Murray River from the Darling to the Great South Bend (1830-1841)'. Honours Thesis, University of Adelaide, 1982.

Massacre" found no fault with the actions of the expedition.¹⁵ At the conclusion of the enquiry, Governor Grey introduced a number of measures that he hoped would "prevent the recurrence of such unfortunate events."¹⁶

In a despatch to Lord John Russell, Grey outlined his plan to appoint a "Gentleman who could continue in his own person the two offices of Resident Magistrate and Protector of Aborigines; and who should be directed to reside upon the banks of the Murray devoting his attention to the suppression of outrages upon the part of overland parties, and to the civilization and improvement of the natives".¹⁷ These objectives were to be achieved in the following way:

I have directed Mr Eyre to bring into operation a system of periodical distributions of flour to the natives; - this distribution being made dependent upon their good conduct. They are to assemble on every other full moon, for the purpose of receiving these presents. Opportunities will be thus afforded them of bringing under Mr Eyre's notice any grievances, under which they may be suffering; and he, at the same time, can impart to them any regulations or directions for their guidance. I confidently anticipate that the measures thus adopted will, for the future, prevent a recurrence of scenes similar to those, which I have lately had to bring under your Lordship's notice.¹⁸

Eyre arrived at Moorundie, near the site of present day Blanchetown, at the beginning of October and two weeks later he was joined by twelve men and a non-commissioned officer of the 96th Regiment.¹⁹ Apart from distributing rations, Eyre made several trips up the Murray as far as Lake Victoria, attempting to make contact with as many groups as he could and, by distributing blankets, re-establish goodwill.²⁰

At the same time that overlanding parties were being attacked on the Murray River, the settlement at Port Lincoln was in a virtual state of siege as a result of constant Aboriginal attacks on stations. The newspapers at the time described the situation in doom-laden, apocalyptic prose and judging from the reports coming from the area, it was not altogether unwarranted. As a consequence of the trouble many settlers were leaving the district and the population fell by a third in the years between 1839 and 1842.²¹ Lieutenant Hugonin, the Government Resident at Port Lincoln, described the effect of Aboriginal attacks: "The deserted stations which are too frequently met with in riding about the country are melancholy by convincing proof of both their hostility and success . . ."²²

It is against this background that Grey ordered a system of ration distribution to be established at Port Lincoln similar to that already operating at Moorundie. After reminding the Government Resident that the district was isolated and the Europeans greatly out-

¹⁵ Governor Grey to Lord John Russell, Governor's Despatches, SA Public Record Office GRG 2/5, No. 52/1841.

¹⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁹ *ibid.*

²⁰ Reports of Sub-Protector Eyre, 5 Feb. 1842 and 20 Jan. 1844, reprinted in 'Papers Relative To South Australia'. *British Parliamentary Papers*, XXXII (1843).

²¹ *The Adelaide Examiner*, 7 Sep., 1842 (3AB); 14 Sep 1842 (3BC); 2 Nov. 1842 (3D, 4A). Hassell, *op. cit.*:75.

²² Colonial Secretary's Office, In letters. SA Public Record Office GRG 24/6/240, 1842.

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numbered, Grey ordered him to distribute three pounds of flour every second full-moon - withholding it only from those said to be shielding criminals.²³ To the Resident Magistrate's surprise, the first distribution at Port Lincoln attracted 100 men, women and, however, it was brought to an abrupt halt by an approaching bushfire.²⁴

Due to the Colony's bankruptcy, the depots at Moorundie and Port Lincoln were financed, at the request of Governor Grey, by the Home Government.²⁵ Even though occasional supplies of blankets and flour were sent to Encounter Bay, Wellington, Bungaree and other locations, usually to coincide with the Queen's Birthday distributions, financial constraints initially prevented any expansion of the system.

(ii) Expansion 1847-1852.

By the middle of the 1840s the pastoral frontier had expanded into the Mid-North and South-East, giving rise to outbreaks of violence between Aborigines and settlers in these districts. In March 1847 Lt. Governor Robe, at the prompting of the Commissioner of Police, asked Moorhouse to look into the establishment of a general system of ration distribution. The depots at Port Lincoln and Moorundie were held up as examples of how rations could be successfully used to 'pacify' the Aborigines.²⁶ Acting on Robe's instructions, the protector made a tour of the newly settled districts to assess the settlers' response to the plan and to get an idea of the best locations for the depots. On his return, he made the following recommendations -

... the distribution of flour should take place once a month (at the full moon), that at the out stations 4lb should be issued to each adult, & 2lb to each child, under twelve years of age, & a registry kept of all who attend.²⁷

In addition to the depots already operating at Moorundie and Port Lincoln, seven sites were recommended: Bungaree and Mt Remarkable in the mid-north, Lake Bonney and Wellington on the River Murray; Guichen Bay and Mt Gambier in the South-East, and Encounter Bay. The distributions were to be conducted by the police from stations already operating at those locations. Drawing on the example of Port Lincoln and Moorundie, it was also suggested that the practice of suspending distribution in the event of theft and until the thief gave up the thief, be persisted with. The monthly distributions began in May 1847 and by the beginning of the following year the Protector believed the system was having an effect. In his final quarterly report for 1848, Moorhouse wrote: "From no station has a native been committed, where the tribes have assembled to receive flour."²⁸

After a period of relative calm in the Port Lincoln district, a series of murders in 1850 caused anxiety among the settlers. The local Corporal of Police, Geharty, suggested to the Police Commissioner that the cause of these attacks was starvation caused by a long drought in the area, "many of the natives are absolutely on the point of starvation . . . in questioning them as to their reasons for injuring the white men, they state that they were

²³ Hassell, op. cit.:74.

²⁴ *ibid.*

²⁵ Lord Stanley to Governor Grey in Papers Relative to South Australia. *British Parliamentary Papers*, XXXII (1843) :304.

²⁶ Matthew Moorhouse, Colonial Secretary's Office, In letters, SA Public Record Office GRG 24/6/286. 1847.

²⁷ *ibid.*

²⁸ Protector's Report, Colonial Secretary's Office, In letters, SA Public Record Office GRG 24/6/225. 1848.

refused food."²⁹ Archdeacon Hale, the Superintendent of the newly established Native Institution at Poonindie, submitted a detailed proposal for establishing order in the area which not only suggested increasing the Police Force but expanding the distribution of rations.³⁰ Responding to this pressure the Government established two new depots, one at Venus Harbour, about 150 miles North West of Port Lincoln, and another at the Salt Creek Police Station on the east coast of Eyre Peninsula.

The settlers' attitude toward the distribution of rations was ambivalent; in some places they agreed it was a successful means of gaining a degree of control and influence over the Aborigines, but they also saw it as a potential danger - by drawing Aborigines into the places where distributions occurred and consequently into closer contact with their pastoral stations. The Government Resident at Port Lincoln outlined these objections in a letter to the Chief Secretary:

The natives of the N.W. parts of this district have little or no intercourse with the settlement, nor is it desirable that they should have, seeing that they would have to pass and repass the line of scattered stations lying between the western coast and the dense scrub, and be under an almost equal necessity of plundering them for the means of support, at least the temptation to commit outrages would be increased.³¹

A similar argument was used by the settlers in the Salt Creek area. Perhaps as a consequence of these expressed fears, the station in the north-west was located at Cherrerou, beyond Venus Harbour and the line of pastoral settlement. Shortly after the location was established a settler, believing he had the protection of the police, moved sheep into the area, only to lose them to Aboriginal attacks.³² The government had gone to great lengths to establish the station beyond the frontier of pastoral settlement, only to find that the boundary moved with them.

At the same time that the out-stations were being set up on Eyre Peninsula, it was suggested that a Sub-Protector be appointed, and a 'feeding station' established in the Northern district. The stimulus was a series of attacks on Hayward's station near Lake Torrens.³³ The plan was deferred, but in November 1853 the Protector wrote:

This appears to be the time for establishing the feeding station for the North. The settlers are all short of men to attend their flocks & the Natives are quite aware of the fact & are much disposed to take advantage of it. The feeding station would be a means of keeping them quiet & would recommend the same scale of allowance as adopted for Port Lincoln.³⁴

The depot, under the authority of Sub-Protector Minchin, was commenced at Mt Brown on the 1st of February 1853. Initially, the distribution of both flour and meat was carried out every day, however the frequency was quickly reduced. Moorhouse summarized Minchin's role: "His aim will be to induce the wild natives from the hills to live at his station, and by

²⁹ Commissioner of Police, Colonial Secretary's Office, In letters, SA Public Record Office GRG 24/6/1577. 1851.

³⁰ Archdeacon Hale, Colonial Secretary's Office, In Letters, SA Public Record Office GRG 24/6/1581. 1851.

³¹ Protector's Report, *South Australian Government Gazette*, 30 Jan 1851:80

³² Colonial Secretary's Office, In Letters. SA Public Record Office GRG 24/6/2966. 1852.

³³ Protector's Report, *South Australian Government Gazette*, 17 June 1852:366.

³⁴ Aboriginal Protector's Letterbooks, 1 Nov. 1852:321. SA Public Record Office GRG 52/7.

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keeping them some time in contact with himself and the police, so far civilize them, as to render them not only harmless but useful to the settlers."³⁵ His efforts in this regard were quite successful; in May he reported that 130 Aborigines were at the station.³⁶

(iii) Contraction 1853-1859.

The Victorian gold rush of 1852 not only saw an exodus of labour from the colony but also mass resignations from the Police Force. At one stage even the Protector applied for leave so he too could try for his fortune in Victoria.³⁷ The dramatic fall in the labouring population, combined with the depletion of the Police Force, caused great anxiety, particularly in the pastoral districts where it was feared that the Aborigines would exploit the situation and wreak havoc throughout the countryside.³⁸ These fears proved to be unfounded, the labour exodus; nonetheless, did have a significant impact on the nature of the relationship between Aborigines and settlers.

In many districts, prior to this time, pastoralists had been physically driving Aborigines from their land, now settlers were actively encouraging their presence. In the South-East, for instance, some pastoralists were offering rations and good wages to induce Aborigines to work for them.³⁹ In these new circumstances, the rations available to Aborigines at police stations were considered an obstruction. Following a suggestion from the Government Resident at Robe, rations at that station were withdrawn from the men, it was said to be "an inducement to some to remain idle and unsettled."⁴⁰ Over the next few years the distribution of rations in most areas was gradually restricted to only the sick and infirm. At the same time the Police and Protectors were to encourage the Aborigines to work for the settlers.⁴¹

After 1852 most districts reported significant increases in the number of Aborigines employed by the settlers. In March 1853, Sub-Protector Mason reported that there were about fifty Aborigines employed by the settlers in the Wellington District - "all well-paid, and food supplied."⁴² Similar reports were being received from other areas.⁴³ In May 1854, Sub-Protector Minchin, conceding that most Aborigines did not work for the settlers, added -

it is very well known to the whites, that such blacks as are employed, and receive sufficient food and clothing, are not only invaluable for their services, but indispensable at present: the work on many stations being chiefly carried on by natives, and to a great extent among the sheep farmers.⁴⁴

It was perhaps in the optimistic light of reports of this nature that the government felt justified in trying to halt the periodic distribution of rations. In 1853 Sub-Protector Scott,

³⁵ Protector's Report, *South Australian Government Gazette*, 2 June 1853:362.

³⁶ Protector's Report, *South Australian Government Gazette*, 28 July 1853 :498.

³⁷ The Adelaide Observer, 7 Feb. 1852 (6D).

³⁸ *ibid.*, 7 Feb. 1852 (5D/6A); 21 Feb., 1852 (6B); 24 Apr. 1852 (4E).

³⁹ Foster, R. 'The Bunganditj: European Invasion and the Economic Basis of Social Collapse.' MA., University of Adelaide 1983:110-112.

⁴⁰ Protector's Report, *South Australian Government Gazette*, 28 July 1853:499.

⁴¹ *ibid.*, 17 June 1852,:366.

⁴² *ibid.*, 25 May 1854:413.

⁴³ *ibid.*, 23 Feb. 1854:150.

⁴⁴ *ibid.*, 24 Aug. 1854:619.

at Moorundie, successfully persuaded the government not to suspend "so trifling an aid for the future".⁴⁵ In the following year the scale of rations allocated to the northern depot at Mt Brown was severely reduced. In his first quarterly report for 1854 Minchin claimed of the Aborigines, "that their ideas seem more steadily fixed on self-exertion", and that the discontinuation of rations for all but the sick and infirm, "may have a good and desirable effect."⁴⁶ It is apparent that the government now considered general and periodic distributions unnecessary, indeed, by 1856 they considered the Protector's Office unnecessary.

With the advent of responsible government in 1856 the Protector's Office was abolished and the responsibility for Aboriginal affairs fell to the Crown Lands and Immigration Office. The main function of the Office was arranging the distribution of rations, on a much reduced scale, to the surviving depots. A report by the Public Accounts Commission in 1856 noted that the only out-stations regularly distributing rations were Wellington, Guichen Bay, Venus Bay and Port Augusta. The Moorundie depot was abolished in September of that year.⁴⁷

Evidence concerning the administration of Aboriginal welfare in the period between 1856 and 1859 is scant, the only official reports regularly published were those of George Mason, who continued as Sub-Protector at Wellington. Mason documented the increasing levels of destitution among the Aborigines and their growing reliance on government rations. In April 1859 Mason reported the presence of one hundred Aborigines near his depot, forty of whom were aged, blind, or sick. He stressed the importance of rations, particularly in the winter months:

If it were not for the liberal supply of food issued by the Government, for the use of the natives, who from age or infirmity, are unable to exert themselves to procure food, many of them would have suffered severely from hunger during the past two months, in consequence of the scarcity of fish in this part of the Murray, and the game having been either destroyed or driven away.⁴⁸

The increase in Aboriginal employment, as a consequence of the labour shortage, seems to have blinkered the government to the fact that many of those who wanted employment couldn't find it, while others were too ill or too old to look.⁴⁹

As the decade neared its end, the increasing reports of destitution among the Aborigines began to be accompanied by demands for government assistance.⁵⁰ In 1857 a group of concerned citizens formed a provisional committee to discuss the problems facing Aborigines. In 1859, the Crown Lands Commissioner toured the Murray district and visited the Poonindie Mission before submitting a report to the government which recommended an expansion in the system of ration distribution.⁵¹ A number of new depots were established almost immediately; they included Overland Corner on the Murray River, and Willunga in the south. Supplies were also sent to Taplin's nascent Mission at Point Macleay.

45 *ibid.*, 25 May 1854:413.

46 *ibid.*, p.412.

47 *South Australian Parliamentary Papers* (1856), Paper No.12.

48 Report on the Aborigines of the Wellington District, *South Australian Government Gazette*, 12 May 1859:419.

49 Protector's Report, *South Australian Government Gazette*, 24 Aug. 1854:619.

50 Various newspaper articles, e.g. *The Adelaide Observer*, 7 June 1856 (Supp 1H); 5 Jul. 1856 (5G); 18 Jul. 1857 (Supp 1E); 1 Aug. 1857 (3GH).

51 *The Adelaide Observer*, 26 Mar. 1859 (7H); 21 May 1859 (5CD).

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As a result of public pressure, and controversy over the operation of the Point Macleay Mission, a Select Committee was set up to investigate the 'Aboriginal problem'. Three months later, in October 1860, the committee presented its report which recommended, among other things, that the Protector's Office be re-established and that an expanded system of ration distribution be instituted:

it is the duty of the Government to supply the physical necessities of the natives, especially the aged, the sick and the infirm, which provision should include dispensing of medicine and medical assistance.⁵²

It was also decided to decentralize the system of distribution, to forward clothing and provisions to 'well-intentioned' settlers in the outlying districts rather than having a few concentrated distribution points. Ill-health among the Aboriginal population was found to be a serious problem so it was recommended that the Protector should be a medical man.⁵³

The report said of the Aborigines: "It is universally admitted that they are fast decreasing in numbers . . .".⁵⁴ There was a growing belief that the Aborigines were a dying race, incapable of civilization and doomed to extinction. It was a belief argued in scientific terms and held generally in the white community. Moorhouse, in his evidence to the Select Committee, echoed the sentiments when he argued that the best that could be done for the Aborigines was to make their passing more comfortable.⁵⁵

The nature of the new Protectorate and system of ration distribution was quite different to the system operating in the late forties. The system initiated by Governor Grey and fine-tuned by Moorhouse, was designed to inhibit frontier violence by providing the Aborigines with an alternate form of subsistence when faced with the alienation of their lands. This is evidenced by the fact that, prior to 1853, most of the depots were established as a direct response to local conflicts. Furthermore, by bringing the Aborigines into constant contact with the police, the usual issuers of rations, a degree of control could be exercised. The reason for the dramatic expansion of ration distributions after 1860 was a growing prevalence of ill-health and destitution among the Aborigines. An illustration of this is that while depots were still being set up on the expanding northern frontier many new depots were also being established in areas already dominated by European settlement.

3. The Ration Depots

By providing at least a periodic focus for Aboriginal communities, ration depots enabled the government to exert a direct influence over local communities - an influence that went beyond the broad intention of providing rations as an alternate form of subsistence. An illustration of this was the government's 'carrot and stick' approach to ration distribution. A practice of withdrawing rations in cases of misconduct was established very early and incorporated in the instructions sent to the first Sub-Protectors at Moorundie and Port Lincoln. In 1847, Moorhouse reiterated the principle in his proposal for an expanded system of ration distribution:

I allude to that part of the instructions, which requested Mr Driver to suspend the issue, provided any theft had been committed during the month, until the thief shall be given up by his own tribe; the plan worked very beneficially at

52 Report of the Select Committee of the Legislative Council upon The Aborigines, *South Australian Parliamentary Papers* No.165, 1860:6.

53 *The Adelaide Observer*, 19 Oct. 1861 (7H).

54 Report of the Select Committee . . . :1.

55 *ibid.*:96.

Port Lincoln & Moorundie & would be worth adopting, at the other stations.⁵⁶

While rations, in the form of food or blankets, were also distributed as rewards, Eyre reported that, in addition to his full-moon distribution, he sometimes gave rations to Aborigines for the performance of menial tasks around the depot.⁵⁷ It was a practice consistent with the early plan to use rations as means of encouraging 'habits of useful industry'. A more common circumstance was to provide extra rations to Aborigines who assisted the police in discovering the identity of their compatriots accused of sheep theft or other crimes.⁵⁸

Another effect of concentrating communities around ration depots is that it allowed the government to use the depots as conduits through which government instructions could be communicated. In 1847, when a range of new depots were being established, the Protector travelled to many of them specifically to speak to the Aborigines. Of his visit to the Mt Remarkable station early in that year, Moorhouse wrote:

I . . . explained to them, as well as my acquaintance with their dialect would allow me, the nature of British law, as affecting property, that this law is administered alike, to white and black men, & I believe that they understood the main outline of that I endeavoured to communicate.⁵⁹

It was not only the Protector who undertook the responsibility of relaying government instructions, local police, Government Residents, and Sub-Protectors were also employed as the need arose. Sub-Protector Minchin, referring to a distribution of blankets at Mt Brown in the north, wrote -

it brought many natives within my reach that continually avoided me, and over whom, by means of a blanket, I was able to gain a little influence, and to caution and advise them as they required.⁶⁰

It is clear that these distributions served many purposes, besides simply providing a substitute for sheep flesh.

Another important, though less definable, aspect of the ration system was the quality of the men who conducted the distributions. Whether Police Troopers or Sub-Protectors, they played a significant role in advocating the rights and representing the needs of the Aborigines in their districts. In the early 1850s when the government wanted to halt or reduce the distribution of rations the issuers in some districts argued strongly and successfully for a continuation.⁶¹ In 1859 George Mason, at Wellington, persuaded the government to provide the Aborigines of his district with boats and fishing equipment - settlers having denied access to the trees usually used to make canoes.⁶² In the early 1860s

56 Matthew Moorhouse, Colonial Secretary's Office, In Letters, SA Public Record Office GRG 24/6/286. 1847.

57 Report of E. Eyre, 10 Jan. 1842, printed in Papers Relative to South Australia, *British Parliamentary Papers*, XXXII (1843), p.305.

58 Journal of the Mt Gambier Police Station, references from 12 May to 22 June 1847. SA Public Record Office GRG 5/2/151/1.

59 Matthew Moorhouse, Colonial Secretary's Office, In Letters, SA Public Record Office GRG 24/6/286. 1847.

60 Protector's Report, *South Australian Government Gazette*, 25 May 1854:412.

61 The Protector of Aborigines for the Wellington District, *South Australian Government Gazette*, 9 Feb. 1860:128.

62 Report of Sub-Protector Scott at Moorundie, *South Australian Government Gazette*, 25

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the issuers also took on the role of advocates, representing Aborigines in disputes over the payment of wages.⁶³ Given that the Aborigines had been dispossessed of their lands and made an administered people, the personal qualities of these men often determined the quality of that administration.

4. The Impact of Rations on Seasonal Movements

Most of the discussion so far has focussed on the way rations were used by the government as a means of administering Aboriginal people, but there was another side to the story: Aborigines adapting ration distributions to fit existing patterns of seasonal movement. With traditional patterns of economic activity disturbed by the alienation of land, rations became an alternative economic resource, exploited in the context of traditional seasonal movements, as well as providing the basis for new patterns of movement. A very early example of this was the movement of Aborigines from Moorundie and other locations on the River Murray, to Adelaide in the winter months. Rations were not, in themselves, the motive for the annual visits, but the existence of the depot at Moorundie and the availability of rations in Adelaide certainly facilitated those visits.

The first visits of Murray River Aborigines seem to coincide with the end of hostilities on the Overland Route and the establishment of the ration depot at Moorundie, under the supervision of Sub-protector Eyre. Eyre described the context of this annual journey:

Occasionally nearly 500 natives have been present at these monthly issues of Flour, and the reason the average attendance is not greater is that immediately after collecting at Moorundie, at the full moon, to receive their flour, from 100 to 300 would usually set off to Adelaide, where there are so many objects of interest and attraction, and remain there for several months at a time, and especially during winter.⁶⁴

It was not only the people from Moorundie who travelled to Adelaide, groups from the River, both north and south of Eyre's station, are known to have made the journey. In the early 1850s a group from Lake Victoria and the Darling River was reported to have made the trip to Adelaide, collecting rations along the way at Moorundie.⁶⁵ It is possible that groups from that area made the journey as early as 1843 or 1844.⁶⁶ Eyre suggests the existence of two routes: the first, by way of Mt Barker, was followed by the groups south of Moorundie; while the second, by way of Gawler, was made by groups from Moorundie and above.⁶⁷ So common was the presence of these River tribes in Adelaide that a second Native School was set up for them at Walkerville. It did not last for very long, as at the end of winter the groups would travel back to their own country and take their children with them - much to the annoyance of Adelaide philanthropists.⁶⁸

It is a reference to the Native School at Walkerville that provides a clue to the timing of

May 1854:413.

⁶³ Protector's Report, *South Australian Government Gazette*, 20 Oct. 1864:886.

⁶⁴ Eyre, op. cit. :374.

⁶⁵ Aboriginal Protector's Letterbooks, 1840-1857 :344-5. SA Public Record Office GRG 52/7.

⁶⁶ Colonial Secretary's Office, In Letters, SA Public Record Office GRG 24/6/193. 1843.

⁶⁷ *ibid.*

⁶⁸ Hassell, op. cit. :116.

this annual visit. In March 1846 Moorhouse wrote that he could not distribute blankets to the parents of children at the Native School, because the blankets had been sent to Moorundie:

It so happens however, that the parents were in Adelaide on the day of distribution and could not be supplied. I fully expect them in Adelaide this year on the 24th May . . .⁶⁹

The 24th of May was the Queen's Birthday when a feast was held for the Aborigines in Adelaide and items, such as blankets, were distributed. The distribution of rations was clearly an inducement for these visits.

The attitude of Aborigines on the Adelaide Plains suggest that these visits did not occur prior to contact, and that they were resented. On at least half a dozen occasions during the 1840s, the Adelaide Plains people, sometimes in concert with groups from Encounter Bay, confronted them in battle, though on most occasions the police stepped in before the commencement of hostilities.⁷⁰ It was during one such confrontation that King John, a prominent Kaurna man, explained the local attitude to these interlopers:

"You write in the paper and tell white man what for we fight. Before white man come, Murray black fellow never come here. Now white fellow come Murray blackfellow come too. Encounter Bay and Adelaide black fellow no like him. Me want them to go away. Let them sit down on the Murray, not here. This is not his country. What he do here? You tell Captain Grey to make Murray black fellow go away, no more fight them. Adelaide and Encounter Bay black fellow no want to fight; but Murray black fellow too much saucy. Let him stop in his own country." At the conclusion of this speech, all responded "very good."⁷¹

Even prior to this date attempts had been made to discourage these visits to Adelaide - aptly, by the refusal of rations to those who had made the journey. However, the government had little success and as late as 1853 the Protector's Report contains a reference to attempts at halting their movements.⁷²

The significance of these annual migrations is that the distribution of rations in Adelaide, and the existence of ration depots in outlying areas, provided an opportunistic economic resource that not only facilitated but, in some instances, encouraged the movements. Eyre had encouraged the Aborigines of Lake Victoria to visit the depot at Moorundie - they not only visited it, but used it as a staging post for their onward journey to Adelaide. While it is true that the distribution of rations proved a successful means of gaining a degree of control over the Aborigines, it is also true that the Aborigines used the depots to fit in with their preferred pattern of movements and to establish new patterns.

The evidence of the way ration distributions were used to complement traditional patterns of movement and economic activity comes from the small town of Willunga in 1859 and 1860. In some ways it is a better illustration than Moorundie because it represents a more settled pattern. In May 1859, Police Trooper Shaw, in charge of the Police Station at Willunga and consequently the distribution of rations, reported the arrival of about 30

⁶⁹ Colonial Secretary's Office, In Letters, SA Public Record Office GRG 24/6/300. 1846.

⁷⁰ *The Southern Australian*, 12 Nov. 1841 (3C); *Adelaide Examiner*, 17 Dec. 1842 (3C); *Adelaide Observer*, 27 Apr. 1844 (5A) and 11 Feb. 1845 (6A); *SA Gazette and Mining Journal* 23 Jul. 1849 (4C).

⁷¹ *The Adelaide Observer*, 27 Apr. 1844 (5A).

⁷² Protector's Report, *South Australian Government Gazette*, 28 July 1853 :498-499.

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Aborigines from Goolwa. They claimed that they wanted to settle at the station but Shaw took a different view:

I believe they have been induced to come here from the report of the liberal supply of rations issued to the Adelaide Tribe, but I do not think (from the enquiries I have made) that they intend to stay longer than the winter months .

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His suspicions proved well founded; in the following January he noted that most of the Aborigines had left the station:

Several of them left for McLaren Vale about three weeks ago and the remainder have gone to that place in order (as they say) to find employment but I believe they have gone on their "annual round".⁷⁴

There is evidence of similar uses of ration distributions in other areas of the state. In the Lower South East during the 1840s and 1850s the Aborigines were highly dependent on rations during the severe winter months but less reliant upon them in winter. The alienation of good land along the Woakwine Range and around Mt Gambier severely undermined the traditional economic activities of winter in this region; however, the coastal strip, the focus of both ceremonial and economic activities during the summer months, was left relatively undisturbed by settlement.⁷⁵

Conclusion

The rationale behind ration distributions was that they were a means of providing support for a people whose traditional economy had been undermined. In that sense they can be seen as a form of compensation. They were also a system of control; by concentrating Aboriginal groups at specific locations and, in Grey's words, by exercising "parental control" over them, it was hoped that they could be drawn away from attacking European stock and encouraged to enter the labour force.⁷⁶ Once a dependence had been established rations could also be used as a political tool, summarily withdrawn to punish groups for perceived misconduct, or to reward individuals for compliant behaviour. The labour exodus caused by the goldrush saw rations withdrawn in an effort to encourage Aboriginal entry into a desperately depleted labour force.

By and large, the objectives of ration distribution were realised: after a tentative start with depots at Moorundie and Port Lincoln, the system was extended to newly settled districts in the late 1840s and, after a short hiatus in the late 1850s, expanded again, in a modified form, with the re-establishment of the Protector's Office in 1861. Despite all this, the Aborigines in most districts of the state exercised a degree of freedom by accommodating their partial dependence on the depots to pre-existing patterns of movement and surviving economic strategies.

73 Crown Lands and Immigration Office, In Letters, SA Public Record Office GRG 35/1/380. 30 May 1859.

74 *ibid.*, GRG 35/1/51. 7 Jan. 1860.

75 Foster, *op. cit.* :37-40, 110-111.

76 Governor's Despatches, Lieut. Governor Robe to Lord Earl Grey, SA Public Record Office GRG 2/5, No.21. 1844.

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