

## **‘CIVILISING’ THE ABORIGINES: CRICKET AT POONINDIE, 1850-1890**

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‘They (the natives) were real sports and behaved like gentlemen  
...’ *St Peters College Magazine* <sup>1</sup>

On 28 August 1850 a letter appeared in the *Register* informing the residents of the British colony of South Australia that ‘an institution was to be founded at Port Lincoln for the religious instruction and moral training of the Aboriginal natives’. The author of the letter was Mathew Hale, new Anglican Archdeacon of Adelaide.

British settlement began in South Australia in 1836, at a time when humanitarians in England were considering ‘what measures ought to be adopted with regard to the native inhabitants of the countries where British settlements are made’.<sup>2</sup> This concern for ‘the coloured subjects of the Empire’ was a result of the abolition of slavery in British Dominions in 1833. The anti-slavery reformers focussed attention on the indigenous peoples of the Empire, including those in Australia. There, in earlier established colonies, especially Van Diemen’s Land (later Tasmania) and New South Wales, race conflict had resulted in a high death rate among Aborigines. New policies, subsequent to the findings of the Select Committee on the Native Inhabitants of British Settlements (1837), insisted on measures for the ‘protection, civilising and conversion to Christianity of Aborigines’.<sup>3</sup>

Public opinion in the Australian colonies held that Aborigines were incapable of becoming civilised, but colonial governments were ‘attracted to any plan that appeared to indicate benevolent intentions’<sup>4</sup> and so, in South Australia, when Archdeacon Hale proposed the establishment of an Aboriginal institution at Port Lincoln, he was encouraged to go ahead with his plan.

Mathew Hale was one of many young British clergymen determined to serve God working among 'native' people under British rule. Hale's biographer, A de Q Robin, wrote of these clerics:

In retrospect it is easy to be cynical about the achievements of many of the colonisers and some of the missionaries. But occasionally the story of the search for riches, the craving for adventure and all the opportunism which characterised colonisation is relieved by instances of genuine altruism. The life of Mathew Blagden Hale provides just such an example.<sup>5</sup>

Hale admits in his account of the 'native' settlement at Port Lincoln (Poonindie)<sup>6</sup> that he had always harboured a passion for missionary service and this was why he joined the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge. He sought a posting in the West Indies after graduating from Cambridge in 1835 but his family, believing him too young, were opposed to the idea. Some twelve years later, in 1847, Hale readily accepted an offer from Augustus Short, first Anglican Bishop of Adelaide, to be his Archdeacon in the new colony and to work there with the Aborigines.

The colonial government in South Australia welcomed Hale's interest in the Aboriginal people. He discovered that they 'were not unmindful of their duty to the Aborigines' and their settlement charter made it clear that the indigenous people would be protected and their rights respected. South Australia had been conceived as a colony espousing 'civil liberty, social opportunity and equality' and the founders were well aware of the devastating effects of 'white' settlement on Aboriginal people in the convict states. They had the best of intentions with regard to the 'native' peoples in colonial South Australia. They were determined, if possible, 'to protect and assimilate' them.<sup>7</sup>

The Colonial Office, determined to improve racial relations in the aftermath of the anti-slavery campaign and in the light of disturbing reports from the older Australian colonies, insisted that the treatment of Aborigines was 'of the first importance in the formation of the new

settlement in South Australia'.<sup>8</sup> A Protector of Aborigines, Dr Mathew Moorhouse, was appointed to look after their interests and it was he who indicated to Hale, on his arrival with Bishop Short, that while Native Schools had been established in Adelaide, 'no arrangement' had been made for them after they left school and they were consequently being 'lost to civilisation'.<sup>9</sup>

Hale responded to this need, and further encouragement from the resident Governor, Sir Edward Henry Fox Young, by suggesting that on graduating from the Native Schools young Aborigines be removed from 'the contamination' of the city and placed in 'a little community . . . where they may be kept under regular Christian instruction . . . given daily employment . . . and a due admixture of relaxation and amusement . . . to make them [aware] of the value of a settled mode of life'.<sup>10</sup> Hale took leave of the Bishop and Adelaide diocese to establish his Aboriginal village, 'modelled on English lines'<sup>11</sup> at Poonindie, fifteen kilometres from Port Lincoln, a farming community on Spencers Gulf.

### **Cricket - a 'Civilising Game'**

In keeping with the idea of an English village, the Aborigines played cricket. In a quarterly report to Governor Young (23 June 1855) Hale referred to the role of rational recreation at Poonindie:

with respect to the general habits of the inmates, they . . . continue to be employed ... lightening their toils by an admixture of cheerful and rational recreation. Preparations have been making [tic] for some weeks past for a Grand Cricket Match between the married men and the bachelors. This match came off a few days since and after a well played and contested game, the married men were declared the winners by a few runs.<sup>12</sup>

On a visit to Poonindie in 1853 to witness his former Archdeacon's work with the 'natives', Bishop Short noted with approval the way the Aborigines played the game.

I was pleased at watching, with the Archdeacon, two native Australian 'elevens' and [observed] not only their neatness in fielding and batting but what was far more worthy of note, the perfect good humour which prevailed throughout . . . no ill temper shown, or angry appeals to the umpire as is generally the case in a match of whites.<sup>13</sup>

The Bishop of Adelaide delighted Hale with this comment for it was precisely for this reason that cricket had been introduced at Poonindie - as a 'civilising' agent. The fact that the Aborigines were successful as well didn't do the 'experiment' any harm as cricket matches against the local Port Lincoln community could display the extent of their 'education in the way of the whites'. So impressed was the Bishop that he encouraged the prestigious Anglican private school in Adelaide, St Peter's College, to consider an annual game against the 'natives' of Poonindie.

In February 1854, when three of 'Hale's natives' - Sam, Sam junior and Charlie - were in Adelaide, they were invited to play cricket with the Saint's boys. The *Register* was complimentary of their skill and demeanour (if patronising in other ways!):

The match at the College ground came off on Saturday. The Port Lincoln natives from Archdeacon Hale's establishment are very fine fellows. They speak pure English, without the slightest dash of vulgarism and are in truth far more gentlemanly than many ... The bowling of Sam senior was exceedingly good . . . The batting . . . of Charlie was much admired . . . the young men of the College honoured *themselves* by treating (the natives) as fellow players and welcome guests.<sup>14</sup>

The three Aboriginal players were 'distributed' between the two teams. Charlie played in John Rounseville's team, Sam senior in Richard Reid's, Sam junior was 'jack of both sides' playing in both teams. The older Sam, whom we know was Sam Conwillan,<sup>15</sup> took seven wickets in the first innings and six in the second. He really was 'exceedingly good' and a credit to the coaching of Hale whom the three confirmed had 'taught them to play

at cricket'. The ability of the young 'natives' should have come as no surprise for a report had appeared in the Register a year earlier stating that 'the mantle of our . . . cricketer's may . . . have fallen upon the Archdeacon's blackfellows at Port Lincoln'.<sup>16</sup>

The Poonindie cricket team was certainly successful. A letter to the Editor of the *Observer* in 1858 from Rev. G W Hawkes assessed them in a positive light:

'They are capital cricketers, the best in the district. They played a match with the settlers at Port Lincoln who brought their best players into the field; but the natives beat them easily.'<sup>17</sup>

In 1873 English travellers Florence and Rosamond Hill visited Poonindie and commented on cricket played there:

Cricket seems for many years to have occupied as important a position [here] as at Harrow and Eton and the Poonindie Eleven have been almost invariably victorious over their white antagonists of Port Lincoln. Sometimes they even go to Adelaide for a match.<sup>18</sup>

The matches in Adelaide were of course against St Peter's College. Bishop Short had been a founder of the so-called 'Rugby of Adelaide' and recommended that both the college boys and the Poonindie 'natives' would benefit from the contact. The visit of the Aborigines to Adelaide was viewed as valuable to the South Australian general community as well. The *South Australian Advertiser* made this point in a commentary on a Poonindie/St Peter's game in November 1874:

It is no doubt wise in those who have charge of the institution to bring the native team down occasionally, not only to give them some recreation, but also to show the public what is the effect of the training they receive at Poonindie. Those who saw the men play could only be favourably impressed with the result of the attempt to civilise them.<sup>19</sup>

In April 1874 the Poonindie ‘natives’ had been successful against a College XI, but in the return match mentioned above and played on the College ground, the Aborigines were beaten by an innings and thirty-three runs.

Gertrude Farr, daughter of the headmaster of Saint’s, noted that these matches were ‘very popular’. She added that ‘the visiting team of natives in white ducks and blue shirts looked and played so well’.<sup>20</sup> George Henry Farr was a genuine believer in the character value of school sport. He had stroked his college boat at Cambridge, had rowed No. 3 in a winning University crew at the Thames Regatta in 1843 and was interested in cricket, football and athletics. When he arrived at Saint’s (June 1854) he was happy to accommodate the Bishop’s suggestion of cricket matches against ‘the Poonindie natives’. Writing of ‘Some Aspects of the Life and Work of George Henry Farr’ in 1976, Rev. Andrew Cheeseman, indicated that ‘the Poonindie Mission . . . held a place in his affections and the resultant cricket matches between the boys of the Mission and boys from his school were a regular feature of the school year’.<sup>21</sup>

### **Close of Play - 1894**

Poonindie was a ‘showcase Mission’<sup>22</sup> and contradicted the view that ‘the Aborigines (were) not susceptible to civilisation’. In assessing the situation in Port Lincoln in the late nineteenth century, Jill Davies concluded that: ‘Aborigines were considered to be inferior to whites [there] . . . but Poonindie proved they were not’.<sup>23</sup> Not only were the ‘natives’ successful in cricket, Poonindie wool was regularly classed the best quality (and the highest priced) in the district<sup>24</sup> and their wheat ‘the finest which has come on the market’.<sup>25</sup>

However, the Mission was always under threat - from the colonial Government and covetous neighbours. The Depression of the 1890s, which caused high unemployment particularly in rural areas, put pressure on the tenure of the land and the Government was petitioned by the local ‘white’ electorate to make Poonindie lands available to unemployed ‘whites’.<sup>26</sup>

Race relations had been poor in the Port Lincoln district before the establishment of Poonindie.<sup>27</sup> It had always been believed (in Adelaide) that the success of the 'natives' at the Mission would ameliorate these relationships but instead they induced envy. In retrospect, it would seem that racist attitudes were probably inflamed also by the success of the Poonindie Aborigines in local sporting competitions. The fact that the cricket team was only beaten once in Port Lincoln was a source of pride to Hale and those who followed him to the Mission, but it was still considered the Englishman's game and losses were keenly felt by the 'white' community. Indeed, it was the great novelist Trollope who suggested that cricket defined the Englishman wherever he was found. Frequent losses must have irked the local 'whites'.

A letter to the *Register* in September 1892, arguing for the dispersal of the Aborigines and the release of their land, provides evidence that admiration for their sporting ability did not translate into a wider respect. It began: 'I admit they are a smart race physically, as they show when they contest with the neighbouring towns at cricket or football'.<sup>28</sup>

The trustees of the Mission, however, gave in to public pressure and relinquished the lease of Poonindie lands; the colonial Government ignored the success of the experiment and satisfied local 'white' voters by opening up the area for 'white' farming. It was a shameful conclusion to the Poonindie 'experiment'. Port Lincoln residents had their damaged self perception as a superior race restored and gained access to the lands they had coveted. David Hilliard in his history of the Anglican Church in South Australia described the episode and actions of the Mission trustees as 'discreditable'.<sup>29</sup> By 1894 most of the Aborigines were moved from the area to other mission stations - mainly Point Pearce and Point McLeay. The 'game' was over!

Colin Tatz in *Aborigines in Sport* reminds us that ‘sport is [supposed] to be an avenue of social mobility, a way out of discrimination, a road to equality’.<sup>30</sup> This analysis of cricket at Poonindie suggests that sport has a very limited role as an ameliorative social agent and that sport may even perpetuate and enhance discrimination.

Mathew Hale hoped that ‘the experiment’ at Poonindie would be good for both the Aborigines and their ‘white’ neighbours. Sport, particularly cricket, was used at the Mission near Port Lincoln as both a ‘civilising agent’ and a means of interfacing with ‘white’ society - ‘a way out of discrimination’. He thought that games within the community would ‘soften local prejudice’. The fact that he appears wrong says much about racism in colonial South Australia, especially at Port Lincoln, but doesn’t in any way belittle the Poonindie ‘experiment’ or diminish the genuine altruistic efforts of Hale. Neither does it alter his assessment of the Aboriginal cricketers of Poonindie. They were, in his own words, ‘fine specimens of men’!<sup>31</sup>

In a postscript to a review of Poonindie, Augustus Short, the Bishop of Adelaide, referred to the cricket matches against the boys of St Peter’s College and stated that they proved ‘uncontestably that the . . . aristocracy of England and the “noble savage” who ran wild in the Australian woods are linked together in one brotherhood of blood - moved by the same passions, desires and affections’.<sup>32</sup> Not so, it would seem!

## NOTES

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4. Jill Davies, ‘Poonindie Aboriginal Station, 1850-1895: A Study in Race Relationships’, BA Hons thesis, Adelaide, 1979, pp. 1,2.
5. S.A de Q Robin, *Mathew Blagden Hale: The Life of an Australian Pioneering Bishop*, Hawthorn Press, Melbourne, 1976, p.i.

6. Rt Rev. Bishop Hale, *The Aborigines of Australia being an Account of the Institution for their Education at Poonindie in South Australia*, SPCK, London, 1889.
7. Refer to Alan Pope, *Resistance and Retaliation: Aboriginal-European Relation in Early Colonial South Australia*, Heritage Press, Adelaide 1989.
8. Lord Glendg cited in Ron Gibbs, *A History of South Australia*, Balara Press, Adelaide, 1969, p. 123.
9. Hale, *Aborigines of Australia*, p. 4.
10. Hale, *Aborigines of Australia*, pp. 11, 12.
11. Peggy Brock and Doreen Kartinyesi, *Poonindie: The Rise and Destruction of an Aboriginal Agricultural Community*, South Australian Government Printer, Adelaide, 1989, p.29.
12. Hale's Report, June 1855, Sommerville Papers. 'The Church of England: Eyre Peninsula and Poonindie Mission', vols 1-6, Mortlock Library, Adelaide.
13. Augustus Short, *The Poonindie Mission described in a letter from the Lord Bishop of Adelaide to the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel*, London, 1853, pp. 19-20.
14. Register, 7 Feb. 1854.
15. John Tregenza, 'Two Notable Portraits of South Australian Aborigines', *Journal of the History Society of South Australia*, no 12, 1984.
16. Register, 29 March 1853.
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22. Davies, 'Poonindie Aboriginal Station', p.19.
23. Davies, 'Poonindie Aboriginal Station', p..29.
24. Sommerville Papers, vol. 3, p. 279; Copy of *South Australian Gazette*, 12 Feb. 1880.
25. Sommerville Papers, *Church of England Year Book*, 1889.
26. Brock and Kartinyeri, *Poonindie*, p. 66.
27. See, Alan Pope, *Resistance and Retaliation*, 1989.
28. Register, 13 Sept 1892.
29. David Hilliard, *Godliness and Good Order: History of the Anglican Church in South Australia*, Wakefield Press, Adelaide, 1986, p. 37.
30. Colin Tatz, *Aborigines in Sport*, ASSH Studies in Sport History, no. 3, Adelaide 1987 p.4.
31. Hale, *Aborigines of Australia*.
32. Augustus Short cited in Hale, *Aborigines of Australia*, p. 100