A ‘Fantastic adventure’: reading Christison of Lammermoor

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In 1927 the British firm Alston Rivers published an account of the prominent nineteenth-century Queensland pastoralist Robert Christison, written by his daughter Mary Bennett. Bennett was praised by a contemporary for producing a ‘life like picture of your father and the masterful and just man he proved himself to be’ and also a ‘pretty complete political history of Queensland in the sixties’. Reviews of the book particularly focused on Christison’s relations with the Dalleburra people, on whose land in the Flinders District he established his pastoral property, Lammermoor, in 1863. The reviewer in The Argus praised Christison for winning the ‘active assistance’ of the local Indigenous population with ‘fearless courage, followed by a spirit of justice and kindness’. ‘Christison’s diplomacy’, the review remarks, was ‘extraordinarily vigorous and accurate’. Contemporary studies of Queensland race relations have also remarked on Christison’s ‘humanitarian concern’ for the Aborigines, suggesting that his relations with the Dalleburra provided a ‘model of racial cooperation and confidence’. The Australian dictionary of biography notes that Christison’s response to frontier race relations ‘shines out of the past to his credit’.

Most recently, Buckridge and McKay’s Literary history of Queensland remarks on Mary Bennett’s ‘well written and humane’ account of her father’s life. Christison’s reputation has been almost entirely derived from his daughter’s book. Unlike many other settler reminiscences and memoirs, however, we are not totally reliant on a single source for information about this pioneer’s life. In Christison’s case, we benefit from what one analyst has called that ‘Victorian obsession for letter writing and diary keeping’. In addition to the published book, there is a substantial documentary legacy in letters and diaries and material in official archival sources. This paper, then, will evaluate Christison of Lammermoor as historical source. When read in conjunction with the other evidence, it will argue that Christison’s relationship with the Dalleburra was somewhat less ‘extraordinary’ than has been previously suggested; rather, the relationship was more complex, and from the perspective of the twenty-first century his ‘benevolence’ and ‘humanitarianism’ were also fraught with paradox.

1 F Weaver to M Bennett, 2 February 1928, Fryer Library, University of Queensland, Mary M Bennett Collection, UQFL 202, box 2.
2 The Argus (Melbourne), 24 December 1927, p. 6.
6 Nancy Underhill, Making do: pioneering gentry in North Queensland [Catalogue produced to accompany an exhibition at the John Oxley Library], Brisbane, State Library of Queensland, 2008, [p. 2].
Bennett is unequivocal in her portrait of her father as romantic hero. From the opening sentence of *Christison of Lammermoor*, she affirms this trope as her defining narrative foundation. ‘Why do we neglect the romantic history of our own time, and the deeds of men of our own race, who adventured alone?’ she asks. Bennett relates details of her father’s impoverished, ‘unmothered’ childhood in the Scottish lowlands. Inspired by his reading of Sir Walter Scott’s *Ivanhoe* (1819), Christison, according to his daughter, saw himself as ‘another knight without inheritance, and the earth a Holy Land for service and adventure’. In 1852, as a fifteen-year-old, Christison journeyed with his brother Tom to Victoria. There he quickly developed a reputation as a ‘first-rate boxer and a fine horseman’. He thwarts an attack by bushrangers, tames ‘a wild horse that no one can ride’, wins horse races against the odds, but abandons the racing game after being offered £1,000 to lose a race – a bribe which he of course refuses. It is fitting that the squatting run he establishes on Towerhill Creek in North Queensland is named ‘Lammermoor’ in deference to both the hills near his birthplace and another novel by Scott, *The Bride of Lammermoor*. Throughout the full course of the ensuing narrative, Christison faces the hardships of solitude, illness, monotony, drought, floods, cyclones, Aboriginal resistance, pestilence, family tragedy, the death of his first wife and a child and the short-sightedness and incompetence of those who will not support his vision for a refrigerated beef industry in North Queensland nor understand the potential of an artesian water supply. Christison confronts, too, a government bent on reclaiming his land and raising his rents and, later in the narrative, the trade union movement, those ‘evil-disposed people’, who lack respect for civil order and property.

Cheryl Taylor and Elizabeth Perkins have drawn our attention to an ‘heroic standard of masculine accomplishment’ in other settler reminiscences of this period. Simon Ryan has argued cogently that explorers’ journals function as ‘imperial discourses of vigorous, manly expression’ and that in them pioneering and exploration are constructed as ‘heroic practice furthering the frontier of empire’. David Denholm suggests that romanticism, more than any other intellectual movement, informed the colonial mindset in early Australia. ‘We shall have to blame William Wordsworth, Lord Byron, Sir Walter Scott and other Romantics for giving colonial Australians the means to shape their dreams with such splendid foolishness’, he

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8 ibid., p. 16.
9 ibid., p. 15.
10 ibid., p. 35.
11 ibid., p. 36, p. 37 and p. 41.
12 ibid., p. 215.
writes. Clearly the movement also gave Australians the means to shape their narratives. Bennett was hardly likely to present her father in a bad or even objective light. Christison's correspondence with his family suggests that his relationship with his 'Dear Mimi' was a fulfilling and loving one. Bennett was not the first to engage in the romanticisation of the Australian pioneer, nor was she the last. Arguably, the central character as romantic hero was one of the few narrative models available to her.

In the light of this, how then do we read Bennett's version of her father's relationship with the Blacks? Christison himself had died in 1915, twelve years before the book was published. He was in no position to qualify his daughter's interpretation of the events of his life. Bennett, for her part, had spent relatively little time in North Queensland. When in Australia, she, her mother and her siblings had lived in Stanthorpe, Tenterfield, Sydney and Hobart and their father would visit them in these places. Bennett was raised and educated in England where she attended art school. Widowed at the age of fifty, she left her homeland for Western Australia in 1930. There she became both a teacher at the Mount Margaret Aboriginal Mission and an agitator for reform on Aboriginal policy through her journalism and correspondence in Australia and Britain. She, unlike her father, devoted 30 years of her life to the cause of Aboriginal rights, in particular the rights of Aboriginal women. Her father, on the other hand, devoted his life to establishing and growing a highly successful pastoral business on an unforgiving and often violent frontier.

In *Christison of Lammermoor* Bennett frequently detours at length from her father's life narrative to make passionate pleas for justice for the Indigenous population. In a period noted for its deafening silence on the issue of settler violence, she writes, 'Massacres of inoffensive blacks were always going on, though they did not often come to light', and elsewhere, 'the blacks were bad' the white men would say loosely "so we dispersed them" meaning killed ... the word has been adopted as a convenient euphemism for wholesale massacre'. On the role of the Native Police she writes:

> Frequently shepherds and settlers had their heads battered in. Then the native police under their white officer would be sent to shoot the murderers, or, if they were not known, any blacks they might happen upon.

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16 There are many preserved letters from Christison to his wife and his children in which he writes with great affection for them — 'his pets', as he called them. Robert Christison Papers, John Oxley Library, (JOL), OM79-21.
18 Bennett, *Christison of Lammermoor*, p. 83.
19 ibid., p. 8.
20 ibid., p. 47.
Such frank admissions of violence perpetrated by white settlers were rare for the time and predated by half a century the raising of that issue in Australian historiography.

In Bennett’s version of his story, Christison selects land to establish his property and then goes about befriending the Dalleburra people and gaining their trust. He begins by capturing a man, whom he names Barney. ‘Simple minded Barney’ then becomes a loyal friend and aide de camp who carries Christison’s message to the tribe.21 ‘The Dalleburra might camp on the far side of the waterhole, sun-up side, and kill kangaroos, emus altogether like before; but no kill horse no kill sheep’.22 Like the hero of an H Rider Haggard novel, Christison enters their camp alone and establishes his authority and then ‘crows a king’ with the gift of a tin plate.23 Initially, contact is not without its challenges, however. Christison thwarts some potential thieves by waiting in hiding and then firing on them with rock salt loaded into a shotgun, when loyal Barney had warned him in advance of their intentions.24 After some early contretemps, Christison settles into a relationship of peaceful coexistence with the Dalleburra. The new pioneer then proceeds to engage them in work on his property and establishes his paternalism by providing them with clothes and tobacco, healing their sick and protecting them from violent attacks by local enemies or by whites.25

He always felt he had the power of keeping the tribe in order and refused to admit that he ran any risks; and whether by good luck or vigilance, he never had serious trouble with them and never had to take a life.26

Bennett suggests that Christison eschewed recourse to the Native Police and indeed confronted them when they came on to ‘his’ land. ‘If you molest my blacks I’ll run you in for assault to Bowen.’27 Other sources, including Christison’s own diary entries from the late 1860s, which Bennett had access to, suggest that this implied policy may be something of a departure from the truth. The diaries make reference on a number of occasions to a location on the property referred to as ‘Native Police Creek’.28 The name suggests strongly that the location may have been used at some stage as a Native Police encampment. In an entry from February 1868, Christison describes finding the bodies of two blacks who had been shot, Fly and Jessie, ‘the latter being of no use and the former having taken to killing sheep’.29 The letters of CW Bowly, who was employed by Christison in 1874, also suggest a strong Native Police presence on Lammermoor.

21 ibid., p. 60.
22 ibid., p. 60.
23 ibid., p. 63.
24 ibid., p. 66.
25 ibid., p. 107 and p. 61.
26 ibid., p. 81.
27 ibid., p. 57 and p. 84.
28 Diary 1868–1869, Robert Christison Papers, JOL, TR1867, box 9568.
29 ibid.
The native police have just been here and this together with Christison’s slight attack of fever has made me very busy... The police went out after the blacks but they got into mountainous country however.  

Bennett articulates what she reads as her father’s ‘tough love’ for the Dalleburra engaged on Lammermoor – ‘wallopings for the naughty, tobacco and rations for faithful blacks’. The children/father metaphor is sustained throughout the text. She celebrates the establishment of the paternalistic relationship. ‘In the face of his energy and commonsense they had to obey like the children that they were’. A neighbour, Robert Gray of Hughenden, records that Christison was ‘a powerful man’ who ‘had great influence over the blacks’. On the north Queensland frontier in the 1860s and 1870s the line between a benevolent master and a ‘Simon Legree’ may well have been both moveable and blurred according to the circumstances. Bowly records:

We have had some trouble with the blacks lately, they have been stealing the sheep and R.C. [Robert Christison] has had to whip one or two who were discovered; on some stations they would have been hunted down and shot.

The issue of sheep stealing was obviously a source of tension. Bennett recounts an incident from 1867 in which Christison establishes that some sheep have been stolen by a local tribe member through the agency of his wives. ‘As he looked at Warmboomooloo anger gave place to admiration, for he was well over six feet and magnificently built’. Christison of course overcomes him in a wrestling match and ties him to a tree.

Advice alternated with whacks, and the burden of the discourse was – ‘I’ll teach you to leave my sheep alone’ ... Christison made clear to him that the present walloping was nothing to the one he would get if he knocked his wives about.

A certain levity prevails in Bennett’s retelling of the incident, which is in marked contrast to the gravitas of the Lammermoor diary in describing another stealing incident and its aftermath. Fraser, an employee of Christison’s, reports:

This morning R.C and W.C. [Willie Christison, Robert’s brother] started for the lambing from where all hands intend turning and giving the blacks a good dressing ... I trust they will get the blacks and give them what they deserve.

Christison himself then takes up the account:

Came down from lambing as reported, Harry and Billy black boys having run away some time last night with the Cobra saddle, two bridles and two new pair of boots ... All the fault lies with Harry and he is really a dangerous boy to be with the blacks as he knows

30 CW Bowly Letters, 21 November 1874, JOL, M272, box 5130.  
31 Bennett, Christison of Lammermoor, p. 81.  
32 ibid., p. 67.  
34 CW Bowly Letters, 28 December 1874.  
35 Bennett, Christison of Lammermoor, p. 80.  
36 Diary 1868–1869, Robert Christison Papers, JOL, TR1867, box 9568. The entry is undated and appears in the space for 12 August 1868 but other dating in the diary suggests that these events are occurring in the middle of 1869.
so much, whenever I get away I shall track him till I find him and shall give him a dressing he will never forget. He must be got rid of in some way.\textsuperscript{37}

What follows then, in Christison's own hand, is very much at odds with the image of her father that Bennett so carefully constructs in the book.

I have now made up my mind to treat them like wild animals, kindness is no use. The better they are treated the worse they are – war to the knife with the men and the whip to the boys. Have now tried all means to civilize them, they now have themselves to blame for what will accrue thereafter and they will soon find out how bitter enemies we are when forced to punish them.\textsuperscript{38}

Harry is eventually captured. As to his fate, the diary is mute.

Bennett suggests that Christison was at odds with fellow squatters in the district in his decision to befriend the Blacks and encourage them to work on the property.\textsuperscript{39} His relations with other pastoralists appear to have been more than amicable, however, and there is evidence of substantial cooperation between Christison and his nearest neighbour, Robert Gray.\textsuperscript{40} There can be little doubt that many of his neighbours were engaged in punitive expeditions against the Blacks. Robert Gray, who wrote the preface to Bennett's narrative of the life of 'my old friend Robert Christison',\textsuperscript{41} acknowledges frankly in his own book that he requested Native Police protection for his property at Hughenden.\textsuperscript{42} For some time in the 1870s the Native Police were based there.\textsuperscript{43} Gray's brother Charles, on nearby Glendower Station, recorded the basic details of punitive expeditions in his diary.\textsuperscript{44} Christison's treatment of the Dalleburra did not appear to be a source of tension between him and his neighbours nor, according to Robert Gray's writing, necessarily even contentious. There are no indications that nearby squatters resented the fact that he might be providing a haven for 'marauders', as Gray called them.\textsuperscript{45} It is likely, as we have seen from the Lammermoor station diary, that such punitive expeditions were condoned and took place on Lammermoor, and Christison and his brothers may well have been engaged in them. Precisely what the euphemism 'a good dressing' connotes is open to interpretation.

Bennett has constructed Lammermoor as a peaceful oasis on a brutal frontier. The notion has prevailed in modern historiography.

\textsuperscript{37} ibid.
\textsuperscript{38} ibid.
\textsuperscript{39} Bennett, \textit{Christison of Lammermoor}, p. 82.
\textsuperscript{41} Bennett, \textit{Christison of Lammermoor}, p. 11.
\textsuperscript{42} Robert Gray, \textit{Reminiscences of India and North Queensland}, p. 163.
\textsuperscript{43} ibid., p. 198.
\textsuperscript{45} Robert Gray, \textit{Reminiscences of India and North Queensland}, p. 163.
Christison had never feared to go alone among natives; the cannibals who consulted wife
or mother before engaging as carriers, who cared so well for their children and aged
people, should be his good friends.46

Lammermoor was, like most of the pastoral runs throughout Queensland from the 1840s to
the 1880s, the site of violent conflict. Christison notes in his diary at one stage, ‘expect an
attack tonight’.47 The rifle loopholes in the Lammermoor buildings noted by Robert Gray
suggest that their occupants were well prepared for such an eventuality.48 The ‘fantastic
adventure’49 of contact with the Dalleburra, as befitting Bennett’s romantic hero, was
doubtless an often gruesome and possibly deadly struggle that could have only one winner.

Christison, like some other pastoralists in the Flinders and nearby Kennedy districts, was
engaged in a process referred to as ‘letting the Blacks in’.

Christison, looking ahead, thought out the question, what to do about the blacks, and
boldly made up his mind to let them come in at all hazards — in his view the only
workable policy.50

Pastoralists had, from their first occupation of runs in north Queensland from 1861, uniformly
adopted a policy of ‘keeping the blacks out’.51 The squatters’ lands were cleared of their
occupants through violent dispersals by Native Police or by the white settlers themselves —
‘uncomplicated frontier conflict’, as one historian has called it.52 By 1868, however, more
pastoralists were allowing Blacks access to their runs and using them as workers.53

Christison may well have been one of the first in the district to do this. Some have suggested
that his example inspired others, such as William Chatfield on Natal Downs, to adopt the
practice.54 It was not new, however. Squatters on the Darling Downs had been ‘letting in’
Aborigines from the late 1840s.55 Typically, it was symptomatic of a second stage in frontier
race relations subsequent to the initial shock of violent dispossession of Aboriginal land. In
Christison’s case, he began with it and it was, in Bennett’s own words, ‘a workable policy’.

Christison adopted it in the face of a critical labour shortage and the threat of major stock
losses or the killing of station personnel during Aboriginal ‘depredations’.56 Doubtless it was
more humane in its side effects than the slaughter that was taking place on other runs, but

46 Bennett, Christison of Lammermoor, p. 140.
47 Diary 1868–1869, Robert Christison Papers, JOL.
48 Robert Gray, Reminiscences of India and North Queensland, p. 130.
49 Bennett, Christison of Lammermoor, p. 63.
50 Bennett, Christison of Lammermoor, p. 56.
51 Noel Loos, Invasion and resistance: Aboriginal–European relations on the North Queensland
frontier 1861–1897, Canberra, Australian National University, 1982, p. 33.
52 ibid., p. 54.
53 Anne Allingham, Taming the wilderness: the first decade of settlement in the Kennedy District,
Townsville, James Cook University, 1978, p. 164.
54 ibid., p. 166; Tim Rowse, ‘Were you ever savages?: Aboriginal insiders and pastoralists’ patronage’,
Oceanía, 58, no. 1, December 1987, p. 84.
55 Dawn May, Aboriginal labour and the cattle Industry: Queensland from white settlement to the
56 ibid., p. 34.
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Christison was above all a pragmatist, intent on establishing and running a successful pastoral business. ‘Letting the Blacks in’ was, to some extent, a calculated risk taken to sustain economic viability.

Arguably, Christison’s access to a large pool of very cheap labour may have given him substantial advantages over other pastoralists and may account in part for his sustained business success. Gray tells us that the Lammermoor Blacks were ‘glad to take payment in tobacco, rations and clothing’. Gray reports elsewhere that a shepherd’s wage was ‘thirty-five shillings a week, exclusive of rations’. Such an expense would have impacted substantially on Christison’s profit margins. The nature of his relations with his labour force needs to be understood more fully. Incidents from Christison’s diary, cited above, demonstrate that it was not always amicable, indeed quite the opposite. Bowly records that the Blacks on Lammermoor were reluctant employees, noting that they ‘soon tire of anything like work’ and are only motivated by the ‘blanket, shirt, trousers and tobacco’ that the ‘best men will get’. Were rations not distributed then to all workers? Allingham makes the point that station Aborigines were wholly under the control of the squatter and that exploitation was ‘eminently possible’, if not common. Ray Evans has argued cogently to the effect that ‘Aboriginal slavery’ may be applied ‘not simply as a loosely analogous term of opprobrium, but as one which may be defined with academic precision and rigour’. When Bennett quotes her father saying, ‘I firmly believe that Barney would die for me or anyone belonging to me’, [my emphasis], it lends weight to such assertions.

Unlike Bennett herself, Christison does not appear to have advocated publicly for Aboriginal rights. He did provide ethnographic details on the Dalleburra for EM Curr’s *The Australian race* (1887) and for AW Howitt’s *Native tribes of South-East Australia* (1904). He appears to have made no contribution, however, to the very public debate on Native Police and settler violence that took place in the press during the 1870s and 1880s, in particular that in *The Queenslander* in the series ‘The way we civilise’. Bennett, in fact, quotes at length from contributions to that debate in the book, although her father is never quoted. Unlike his neighbour Robert Gray who claimed that ‘we troubled ourselves little about the outside

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58 ibid., p. 142.
59 CW Bowly Letters, 7 March 1874, JOL, M272, box 5130.
60 Anne Allingham, *Taming the wilderness*, p. 172.
63 *The way we civilise, black and white, the Native Police: a series of articles and letters reprinted from the Queenslander*, Brisbane, G&J Black, 1880.
64 Bennett, *Christison of Lammermoor*, pp. 97–8.
Christison was very much a public figure in the colonies and back in Britain. According to his daughter’s account, he was a reluctant public figure and was most self-effacing about his achievements. She describes one public speaking engagement in Chelsea in 1880.

Christison began nervously ... ‘Kindly pardon me if I read from a paper’ – but no sooner did he warm to his subject – Queensland – than he forgot his careful notes, the audience might have been campfire mates, and while he spoke they were in Queensland ... According to Bennett, he ‘spoke of the blacks’ kindliness and intelligence and of the shameful and cruel treatment they suffered from the whites’. Christison published pamphlets, wrote letters to newspapers and gave public talks and voiced his opinions on a vast range of issues including imperial defence, federation, North Queensland separatism, free trade vs protection, the annexation of New Guinea, Thomas McIlwraith, trade unions, land legislation, tropical diseases in stock, and other topics associated with the pastoral industry. This researcher has been unable to locate any evidence, other than that in Bennett’s book, that he publicly advocated for Aborigines. There survive in his papers some notes he made on the topic. According to his daughter, ‘It is clear he intended to write an account of the blacks. This idea unfortunately he never had time to carry out.’ Christison for many epitomised the successful northern squatter. In Vance Palmer’s National portraits, first published in 1940, it is Christison who is selected to represent the profession in what amounts to another retelling of Bennett’s narrative. The ‘pioneer becomes a patriarch’ in ‘a typical pioneering episode’, as Palmer calls it. For this patriarch to have been an active public advocate of Aboriginal rights in Queensland or in Britain in the second half of the nineteenth century would have been inconsistent with his metier and with the tenor of his colonial project.

Bennett clearly selects episodes from her father’s narrative which accord with a version of him that she believes in, perhaps, but certainly that she wants to project to her reader. It is a version that matches with her own values and priorities, especially in relation to the treatment of Australian Aborigines. Unlike her father’s beliefs, these beliefs were forged away from the cauldron of a violent frontier. It is also a selective telling of the family history.

Archival evidence brings to light the details of one particular episode involving the Christison family, of which no mention is made in the book. It is particularly germane to this study. On one of her trips to Lammermoor in November 1898, Mary Christison, Robert’s second wife and the mother of Mary Bennett, ‘adopted’ a ‘half-caste’ girl of about two years of age who

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66 Bennett, Christison of Lammermoor, pp. 145–6.
67 ibid., p. 146.
68 Annotation by Bennett accompanying ‘Notes on the Aborigines’ compiled by Robert Christison, MM Bennett Collection, JOL, OM79-21, vol. 1.
had been ‘offered for sale in Hughenden ... by her then step father for one pound’.\textsuperscript{70} We know that traffic in Aboriginal children was common in this region.\textsuperscript{71} The child’s skin was very pale apparently. Her mother was a local Indigenous woman and her father was a Mr Gordon, the manager of Yarrow Mere Station near Townsville.\textsuperscript{72} Mary Christison obtained official permission to take the child she had named Jane Gordon back to live with the family in England in order to have her ‘educated and brought up as an English child ... my young daughters and I have taken a great deal of trouble to teach her clean habits and good manners’.\textsuperscript{73} Mary appears to have been motivated initially by a humanitarian concern for the girl’s welfare. By May of 1900, however, the Christisons were anxious to rid themselves of Jane. According to Mary Christison’s correspondence with the Queensland government, it was because ‘the severity of our climate is too trying for her lungs, which are affected by cold and damp’.\textsuperscript{74} Prior to this letter, however, Robert had written to his wife in London from Queensland, ‘As to Jane, if you have not got her definitely settled and relieved from all future responsibility go and see Sir Horace Tozer, Agent-General for Queensland’.\textsuperscript{75} Queensland is not their first recourse. Mary is also endeavouring to get Jane into an English home or even, for reasons that are not clear, a Canadian one. This solution hardly accords with Mary’s statement that she seeks Jane’s relocation because of her bronchitis and her adverse reaction to the ‘cold and damp’. Two weeks later Christison wrote again:

If you can get her into the Canadian home it will be well, that is if you are relieved of all responsibility and expense even if you get her in the home. I would strongly advise you to try the Agent General and have her transferred to the Government of Queensland who ought to take charge of her and send her to this home for half castes. This is, I feel confidently, your best plan for it makes you then free. It is the government’s duty to care for her. I think that if the Canadian home takes her you will have to make a continuance payment and why should you and I work and economise for such a purpose.\textsuperscript{76}

On 4 August 1900, Jane, by then about four years of age, was sent back to Queensland alone on board the \textit{Duke of Sutherland}. The Christisons met the expenses of the voyage and paid ‘a stewardess to take care of her until she is landed’.\textsuperscript{77} Jane arrived in Queensland in late September and was assigned to the Office of Protector of Aborigines. Archibald Meston recorded in a memo that she was taken to a home in South Brisbane. The same memo contains an annotation from Home Secretary JF Foxton, ‘To be sent to Fraser’s

\textsuperscript{70} Mary Christison to Horace Tozer, 18 July 1900, Queensland State Archives, Colonial Secretary’s Office, Col/145, Item Id 17983, 14806/1900.
\textsuperscript{71} Anne Allingham, \textit{Taming the wilderness}, p. 171; Crow, ‘Colonialism’s paradox’, pp. 79–82.
\textsuperscript{72} Mary Christison to Mr Gordon, 22 June 1900 [copy], Queensland State Archives, Colonial Secretary’s Office, Col/145, Item Id 17983, 14806/1900.
\textsuperscript{73} ibid.
\textsuperscript{74} ibid.
\textsuperscript{75} ibid.
\textsuperscript{76} Robert Christison to Mary Christison, 16 May 1900, Robert Christison Collection, JOL, OMR39, 1867/34.
\textsuperscript{77} Robert Christison to Mary Christison, 31 May 1900, Robert Christison Collection, JOL, OMR39, 1867/35.

Mary Christison to Mr Gordon, 22 June 1900.
Island when opportunity serves'. From 1897 Aborigines from a large number of locations across Queensland were forcibly removed and sent to Bogimbah on Fraser Island. Here they suffered at the hands of a brutal, authoritarian, controlling regime in appalling health conditions. In the four short years of her life, Jane Gordon had journeyed from a perilous and neglected existence in her spiritual homeland to the opulence and indulgence of life with the Christisons at their Hampstead Heath address in London. Now 'unmothered', to borrow Bennett's adjective, she faced the hellhole that was Bogimbah. On 9 December 1900 Robert wrote again to his wife, 'I have heard nothing of Jane'. Nothing more is known of her fate.

Curiously, despite Bennett's own sympathies with the Aboriginal cause and her unfailing commitment to presenting them in a favourable light, there is one passage in Christison of Lammermoor that does not accord with those sensibilities. Bennett describes a 'half caste' child she herself sees while on a trip to Lammermoor in 1910.

But surprise gave way to disgust when she perceived in the hut a half caste baby ... it was the most complete contrast to all the full-blooded black children Mimi [the author] could remember; instead of glowing copper, its skin was sickly yellow; instead of the lively intelligence and concentration of aboriginal children, it had a vacant look, mean and complaining, and its wobbly mouth was pulled down to a whine.

There is a vitriol in Bennett's description which belies her championing of the Aboriginal cause. Did the baby bring back memories of Jane? Had Bennett and her younger siblings played a role in Jane being discarded from the Christison family ten years earlier? Bennett was 19 years of age when Jane was sent back to Queensland. She would have known what was taking place. Might the memory of Jane Gordon have haunted her in some way in later life or inspired her to her later work in some compensatory fashion? There are no clues in the text. We can only speculate.

From the publication of Christopher Hodgson's Reminiscences of Australia in 1846, through the early decades of the twentieth century, there were many published accounts of pioneer life in Queensland, either from travellers or from former colonists whose tenure in the outback was never intended to be permanent. There was clearly a market in Britain for such books. Potential investors could be attracted with tales of the colony's untapped riches. From the comfort of a Victorian or Edwardian drawing room, readers could vicariously live the imperial experience. Confrontation with 'wild' Aborigines was part of that experience.

78 Queensland State Archives, Colonial Secretary's Office, Col/145, Item Id 17983, 14806/1900.
80 Bennett uses the term in a description of her father's youth. Bennett, Christison of Lammermoor, p. 16.
81 Robert Christison to Mary Christison, 31 May 1900, Robert Christison Collection, JOL, OMR39, 1887/54.
82 Bennett, Christison of Lammermoor, p. 259.
Rugged individualistic males tamed the wilderness, brought Christian values and civilisation and become empire heroes. In so far as *Christison of Lammermoor* contains all these elements for its readers, it is a conventional account of pioneer life. It is distinctive though in that it exposes the brutalities of the violent occupation of Aboriginal land and white reprisals and at a time when so many other colonial reminiscences were mute on that side of the issue. This element is introduced and sustained by Bennett. It matches with her values and her agenda. A hero, in Bennett’s eyes, could not be the perpetrator of violent crimes against Aborigines. No hero would declare ‘war to the knife’ to the Blacks or abandon responsibility for a four-year-old helpless girl to an uncaring bureaucracy and quibble about the cost. Bennett evokes post-Enlightenment notions of an ideal humanity in her prose, comparing the past, that ‘virile vivacious race that filled Australia’, with the present, the ‘few degraded township blacks who are to be seen dying of civilization’. For her, there is no space for the Blacks to occupy between noble savage and depraved fringe dweller. Ironically, perhaps, Lammermoor in its heyday under her father’s patriarchy may have provided such a space.

From the twenty-first century perspective there are inherent paradoxes in the notion of an ‘enlightened, humanitarian’ squatter in north Queensland in the 1860s. Profits were the benchmark of the success of the colonial project and profits were dependent on the dispossesson of the land’s Indigenous occupants. We need to be wary, though, about making judgements from the high moral ground of historical privilege. Christison, like his contemporaries, was a pioneer driven by a powerful need to succeed financially in a hostile environment. He was not a brute, though he was capable of brutalities. Nor was he a saint, though he did demonstrate behaviours that were often more humane than many of his contemporaries. That heroic ‘poetic nobility’ in pioneer reminiscences identified by one researcher can easily be mistaken for evidence. Historians need to be alert in their readings of texts such as *Christison of Lammermoor* and to appreciate the context in which they were produced. It is probably no coincidence that the accounts of a number of the ‘benevolent’ pioneer squatters – Robert Christison, Tom Petrie, the Duracks – were written by their daughters years after the events they describe took place. Narratives of pioneers produced by their ‘dutiful daughters’ need to be scrutinised with particular care. We need to ensure that these accounts, wherever possible, are checked against other sources before these versions of past lives become enshrined in orthodoxy.

83 ibid., p. 101.
84 Anne Allingham, *Taming the wilderness*, p. 167.