The Reverend Ernest Gribble: a Successful Missionary?

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Ernest Gribble provided many Aborigines with their introduction to Anglicanism and their first continuous contact with European culture. His remarkably long career lasted from 1893 until his death in 1957, making him the Anglican Church's longest serving missionary to the Aborigines and the second longest serving from all denominations. In his sixty-four years as a missionary, Gribble exercised a powerful influence and control over thousands of Aborigines across Northern Australia. He was the pioneer missionary at Yarrabah (1893-1909), near Cairns, Queensland, and at Forrest River (1914-1928), near Wyndam, Western Australia. He was also the Warden of Fraser Island (1900-1904), Queensland; he established the Mitchell River Mission, on the Gulf of Carpentaria, and was the first Anglican Chaplain stationed at Palm Island (1930-1957), off the coast of Townsville in Queensland.

Though initially reluctant to enter missionary work, Gribble was a successful missionary according to the requirements of the Australian Board of Missions (ABM) at the end of the nineteenth century. Other missions were modelled on his methods; in 1957, he was awarded the OBE for his life's work with the Aborigines. In reality, many of his achievements were illusory or questionable. Privately he realise his failings but rarely admitted them publicly, presenting a facade of arrogant self-confidence. This invariably caused conflict with fellow workers and difficulties for ABM administration.

Gribble's egotism was symptomatic of a forceful authoritarian personality. Authoritarianism fashioned his missionary methodology and reflected a strong ethnocentrism that was simultaneously tempered by a sincere concern for Aboriginal welfare. His methods and personality evoked

1 Only Pastor Swartz of the Hopevale Luteran Mission worked longer as a missionary to the Aborigines.

2 Gribble is appropriately described as the pioneer missionary, though not technically the founder. No Aborigines had visited Yarrabah Mission before his arrival; the original Forrest River staff had resigned within twelve months.
passionate reactions; contemporaries either admired or loathed him. He has been called "tyrannical and conceited" and branded "a big bully". Yet others saw him as a man of "modesty and absolute self-abnegation" with "intelligence...foresight [and a] broad mind". a "kindly conscientious" man who "tempered zeal with tact". Within the Anglican Church there were some who considered Gribble a genius; many Aborigines respected his humanitarian motives but condemned his authoritarian methods.

Academics are just as divided. Geoffrey Bolton describes Gribble as a "trouble-maker" and an "obstinate, tactless man", but admires his "moral courage". Tigger Wise, biographer of A.P. Elkin, is more severe and encapsulates the opinions of Gribble's detractors: "a reckless tortured tyrant...[who] ran his world with meglomaniacal fanaticism...with a bible in one hand and a whip in another".

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3 A.P. Elkin, Journal, 29 May 1928, Elkin Papers, Fisher Library, University of Sydney, Box 1, 1/1/1.
4 Louise Wood to A.P. Elkin, 7 July 1928, Elkin Papers, Box 6, 1/1/68.
5 Morning Post, 29 January 1907, p.3.
6 R. Dyott, Travels in Australasia, Birmingham 1912, p.140.
7 D. Jones, Trinity Phoenix: a History of Cairns and District, Cairns 1976, pp.335-36. For other sympathetic views of Gribble see K.E. Evans, Missionary effort towards the Cape York Aborigines 1886-1910, BA(Hons) University of Queensland 1969, p.28; P. Smith, Like a Watered Garden: Yarrabah 1892-1909, the foundation era, BA(Hons) James Cook University 1980.
8 Northern Churchman, 1 May 1909, p.8.
9 Interview with Mrs S. Foley.
Ernest Gribble was a controversial character. The question of his success as a missionary and the role his personality played in shaping his methodology as a missionary are central to the controversy.

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According to family legend, Ernest Richard Bulmer Gribble was dedicated to the Church and missionary work at birth. He was born in Geelong in February 1869, the eldest of the twelve children of John Brown (J.B.) Gribble and his wife Mary Anne (née Bulmer) Gribble who established Warangesda Aboriginal Mission in N.S.W. and the Gascoyne Mission in Western Australia. His parents always intended that Ernest would be a missionary and continue J.B.'s work.

The foundation for Ernest's missionary career was laid during his youth. He wrote of his years at Warangesda Mission as amongst the happiest of his life. He attended the mission school and played and hunted with the Aboriginal children, positive encounters which undoubtedly fostered his compassion for the Aboriginal people. In 1887, Ernest accompanied his father to Western Australia to establish the Gascoyne Mission. At one stage, while J.B. was in Perth, the seventeen year old Ernest managed the mission single-handed for nine months: building, farming, teaching in the school and offering spiritual leadership. The experience provided a taste of life as a pioneering missionary.

Being the son of a missionary influenced the development of Gribble's methodology. He had no formal training in missionary work or anthropology but most of J.B.'s friends and associates were missionaries; discussion of the plight of Aborigines and missionary strategies dominated conversations at home. Gribble learnt his father's methods and accompanied him on a visit to Daniel Matthews' Maloga Mission, gaining a broad view

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of missionary methods. He modelled Yarrabah and Forrest River on the examples of Warangesda and Maloga, incorporating features his father and Daniel Matthews had borrowed from Blagden Hale at Poonindie.¹⁵

Ernest Gribble also had many of the personal qualities necessary for a pioneering missionary at the end of the nineteenth century. He was an accomplished horseman with a passion for the outdoor life.¹⁶ He worked as a stockman and drover before becoming a clergyman and relished the battle with nature integral to establishing a mission and making it prosper materially. Gribble even looked the part: "a swarthy individual...with altogether the appearance of a bushranger".¹⁷

But Ernest did not want to be a missionary. Teased at school because of his father's work, he hated accompanying him on parish visits and unsuccessfully resisted going to the Gascoyne.¹⁸ When the mission failed and J.B. was humiliated and hounded from Western Australia for championing the Aborigines against vested pastoral interests, Ernest "time and again deplored the fact that he was the son of a Missionary to the Blacks".¹⁹ Resolved that his experiences in Western Australia would not be repeated, he emphatically refused to help his father establish Yarrabah.²⁰

However, Ernest could not find another career. He experimented with a variety of occupations, including school teacher, insurance salesman and drover, and failed at each. At the beginning of the 1890s depression, he was unemployed with little prospect of work. The Bishop of Goulburn, probably influenced by J.B., offered him the post of Catechist at Tumburumba, in his father's former parish of Adelong. Gribble hesitated but his mother urged him to accept; the £60 per year salary was also an attractive inducement.²¹

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¹⁵ See for example Gribble, Over the Years, p.6.
¹⁶ Ibid.
¹⁷ A.B.M. Review, 1 December 1918, p.140.
¹⁸ Gribble, Over the Years, pp.5-6, 11; M.A. Gribble to J.B. Gribble, 12 October 1885; J.B. Gribble to E.R. Gribble, 26 October 1885, Gribble Papers, 1/1/6.
¹⁹ Gribble, Over the Years, p.26.
²⁰ Gribble, Forty Years with the Aborigines, p.53.
²¹ E.R. Gribble, Life and Experiences of an Australian, Gribble Papers, 15/20/8, p.11.
Given his Christian convictions, preparation for clerical life and parents' wishes, he presumably rationalised that this was where his destiny lay.

Yet Ernest still resisted his father's entreaties to enter missionary work. In 1892, J.B., fallen seriously ill while struggling to establish Yarrabah Mission in North Queensland, insisted that Ernest take leave and come to Yarrabah. Ernest resented his "marching order", convinced that J.B.'s illness was a ruse to get him into missionary work. But he obeyed the summons and agreed to spend six weeks at Yarrabah; he remained determined to return to Tumburumba.

By the time Ernest arrived at Yarrabah, J.B.'s health had deteriorated. He was suffering from pneumonia, malaria and the beginnings of tuberculosis; hospitalization was essential. As J.B. left Yarrabah he implored his son to remain permanently and help establish Yarrabah. Ernest refused.

Denying his father left Ernest wracked with guilt and indecision. He confided to his journal:

I do not know what to do he wants me so badly to stay and yet my heart is in my work at Tumburumba. O God what shall I do...stay here or return my God I only desire to do what is right.

The basis of his guilt was complex. Submission to parental authority married the Christian virtue of humility and the fifth commandment's directive to "Honour thy father and mother". Moreover, obedience to his earthly father was synonymous with obedience to his heavenly father. By refusing J.B., Ernest was denying a fundamental tenet of his Christian faith. A renunciation of the puritan concept of duty which had been inculcated during his youth, it echoed St Peter's denial of Christ. These factors were the basis of Ernest Gribble's decision to become a missionary and stay at Yarrabah.

When J.B.'s health worsened, the ABM asked Ernest to remain at Yarrabah; reluctantly he agreed. In his journal he recorded

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22 J.B. Gribble to M.A. Gribble, 4 September 1891, 9 August 1892, Gribble Papers, 2/1/8.
23 Gribble, *Over the Years*, pp.43-44.
24 E.R. Gribble, Journal, 13 November 1892, Gribble Papers, 3/10/1; *Over the Years*, p.44.
I am alone & not alone with three black boys with the work of forming the station cast upon my unworthy shoulders...may God help me to be a willing soldier in this service.27

Ernest did not have the opportunity to recant his denial in person. His father never returned to Yarrabah, but died on 3 June 1893; his dying wish was for Ernest to devote his life to missionary work. Ernest believed that his father had left Yarrabah to him as a "sacred trust"; "it was clearly [his] duty to remain" and make missionary work his life.28 This thought sustained Ernest Gribble during his life as a missionary.29

Despite his resolve, Gribble was at first uncomfortable with missionary life. He complained of loneliness, "half-heartedness" in the work and wished that he had never left Tumburumba.30 He also suffered from vague indefinable illnesses, perhaps the physiological symptoms of depression.31

Gradually he became reconciled to his new life. Some of the loneliness was alleviated when his mother and three siblings came to live at Yarrabah and in 1895 he married Amelia Wright, a Cairns girl, who bore him three sons. Ordained a deacon in 1894, he was priested four years later. This entrenched him in a clerical career and increased his stature and authority at Yarrabah, in missionary circles and with the local white community.

These factors alone were insufficient to sustain the reluctant missionary throughout his sixty-four year career but the rewards of success encouraged him to stay in the field. At the end of the nineteenth century, ABM and its supporters had a clear vision of missionary success. They demanded impressive material progress to prove that their donations were not being wasted; self-sufficiency was preferred because it removed all financial responsibility. Also necessary was a growing mission population and


28 Gribble, Over the Years, pp. 4, 45; E.R. Gribble to Canon Needham, ABM Chairman, 5 June 1940, Gribble Papers, 8/12/5.

29 Gribble, Over the Years, p.48.


31 Ibid., 12 November; 4 December 1892; 18 December 1892.
evidence that residents were being "civilized" by abandoning traditional culture and values in favour of Europeanization. The final criterion was demonstrable evidence of conversions. The sincerity of conversions was difficult, if not impossible, to gauge but statistics showing increasing numbers of baptisms and confirmations were acceptable testimony.

Information about the progress of missions was disseminated through ABM journals and Gribble's reports to the Board and local committee. According to these, and judged by contemporary criteria, Gribble's missionary work was highly successful. Between 1893 and 1909, the mission population at Yarrabah increased rapidly, encouraged by government legislation which forcibly removed Aborigines to missions and reserves, and the expansion of white settlement which consumed Aboriginal territory, destroyed traditional food supplies and disrupted tribal life. By the time of Gribble's departure from Yarrabah, in 1909, there was a population of 500 including 200 communicants, 120 married couples, 87 school children and a community of fifteen villages with dormitories, a school, hospital, homes for each married couple and five churches.32

To Europeanize the Aborigines, Gribble introduced all the trappings of "civilization". Telephones connected the main buildings; mission residents produced a newspaper entitled Aboriginal News; the mission band performed, to acclaim, throughout Queensland; there was a Cadet Corps, Ambulance Brigade, Fire Brigade and an elected government formed from the male communicants.

To satisfy ABM's demand for self-supporting missions, tropical fruits, coffee, coconuts and rice were grown for domestic consumption and sale in Cairns. Fish was trapped and sent to the Cairns freezing works while the mission cutter Hepzibah was used for commercial bêche-de-mer fishing. Gribble even organised selling local ferns and orchids to Brisbane florists.33

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32 Unidentified newspaper cutting, Gribble Papers, 14/20/6; Gribble, Despised Race, p.45; Missionary Notes, 10 February 1909, p.3.

22. Murragun Settlement, Yarrabah
Yarrabah's material growth was achieved despite repeated setbacks. In 1894, a cyclone destroyed the mission house and cutter; four years later a gale flattened the newly completed church. Another cyclone wiped out the entire mission in January 1906, destroying the material progress of thirteen years. Whilst many would have abandoned the enterprise at this stage, Gribble's remarkable determination and energy came to the fore and the mission was completely rebuilt.

Superficially, Yarrabah's spiritual development seemed impressive. The first confirmation took place on 19 December 1896, just four years after Gribble's arrival. By 1909, 230 Aborigines had been confirmed and 377 baptised. There was a surpliced choir and a Church Lads Brigade; from January 1897, local Aborigines gave addresses at services. Several Aborigines were licensed as lay-readers and one served as the first Aboriginal representative to Synod. In 1907, Horace Reid, a mission resident, won the Bishop's prize for first place in the Sunday School Exams. According to St Paul, one measure of successful conversion is the emergence of a self-initiated church. In May 1897, Gribble learnt that mission residents had organised a weekly prayer meeting; in the same year, local Aborigines initiated a programme of Aboriginal evangelism amongst surrounding tribes. Eleven years later, James Noble, his wife Angelina and Horace Reid volunteered to work as missionaries at Roper River in the Northern Territory.

Progress was slower at Forrest River during Gribble's administration from 1914 to 1928. The East Kimberley mission was located on the 1.6 million hectare Marndoc Reserve so that fewer territorial or legislative

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34 *Morning Post*, 31 March 1898, p.5.
35 Figures extracted from E.R. Gribble's Journals, Gribble Papers, Boxes 3-4, and the Yarrabah Baptism Register, St Albans Church, Yarrabah.
37 Gribble, *Despised Race*, p.42.
pressures forced Aborigines to join the mission. By 1928, the Aboriginal mission population totalled 111 but included only about 50 local Aborigines. Nevertheless, by 1929 when Gribble left Forrest River Mission there was a small village. Streets, named after Anglican missions, crossed each other in grid formation. Buildings included a hospital, dormitories, married people's homes and the mission's spiritual life centred on the Church (St Michael and All Angels): the only one in the East Kimberley when completed in 1921.

To contribute to the mission's economic viability, vegetables, maize and millet were grown for residents. Watermelons were grown for sale in Wyndham and peanuts produced for the Adelaide market. A herd of 2,800 cattle was maintained for sale to the Wyndham meatworks and Gribble organised the production of cotton of sufficient quality to win seventh place at the Wembley Exhibition.

Gribble's success with conversion was less impressive. The local tribes had had little contact with Europeans before Gribble's arrival and the Aborigines' ability to maintain their traditional cultural and economic life on Marndoc Reserve lessened the mission's appeal. In fourteen years, only 44 were confirmed and 134 baptised.

Nevertheless, these achievements were surprising and a demonstration of Gribble's forceful character, for Forrest River was besieged with difficulties. The mission was isolated, its only access by boat to Wyndham which could take as long as four days. Supplies from Perth were often delayed. Food shortages were a perennial problem and drought, flood, plagues of ticks, locusts and grasshoppers slowed local food production. Nor were there any luxuries for the staff. For two years there were no chairs at the mission and when finally acquired they were "Kimberly Chippendale" i.e. built by staff from onion and oil boxes. Accommodation

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42 Western Australian Church News, November 1921, p.10.
43 Gribble, Forty Years, pp.211, 214-6; Western Australian Church News, September 1916, p.15, March 1915, p.14, February 1924, pp.21, 211, 214.
44 Gribble, Despised Race, p.113.
was also inadequate; staff slept on the verandahs of dormitories and in the store. There was little privacy and even by 1927 there was no bathroom.\(^{46}\) To economise and because of the problems of getting materials to Forrest River, the original buildings were built with local timber and grass. Consequently, fires were common; Gribble had to rebuild the mission in sun-dried brick which further slowed material advancement.\(^{47}\) In addition to these hardships, tragedy often struck. In 1925, an explosion destroyed the Mission launch; three Aboriginal men died and Gribble's son Jack was badly burned.\(^{48}\) In October the following year, Gribble's daughter-in-law, Edith, died while working at the mission.

Gribble's chaplaincy at Palm Island, from 1930 to 1957, also appeared successful by contemporary criteria. With characteristic vigour, Gribble supervised the building of three churches (one at Palm Island and two on Fantôme Island), a tennis court and a hall that became the social centre.\(^{49}\) The hall was used for the weekly dances, church meetings and the Boys' Club, Girls' Guild, Young People's evening and Tennis Club that Gribble began.\(^{50}\) He also established a lending library; a boys' choir; reading room and Women's Guild.\(^{51}\) During World War II, Gribble held noon Intercession for "victory and peace" and his congregation collected money for the Red Cross.\(^{52}\) Gribble also established a Memorial Fund in memory of James Noble, his assistant at all three missions and Australia's first Aboriginal Anglican deacon. The fund provided secondary education for Anglican boys and girls and Gribble personally monitored the progress of each student.

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\(^{46}\) Rev. A.S. Webb to Canon Burton, ABM Secretary in Western Australia, 30 April 1927, Correspondence of ABM in Western Australia, ABM Archives, Sydney, Box 5.8.

\(^{47}\) Gribble, *Forty Years*, p.192-93.

\(^{48}\) *ABM Review*, 12 November 1925, p.1.

\(^{49}\) Bishop Feetham to Canon Needham, 7 March 1940, Gribble Papers, 8/12/5; *Northern Churchman*, 1 July 1939, p.12.


\(^{51}\) *Northern Churchman*, 1 June 1931, p.6; 1 May 1936, p.10; 1 November 1939, p.15.

\(^{52}\) *Report of the Synod of North Queensland*, 1941 and 1943; *Northern Churchman*, November 1942, p.10.
From 1931, Aborigines went with Gribble to represent Palm Island at the North Queensland Synod; a number including Ellison Obah, Roy Tippo, Azara Gessu, Ned Martin and Ned Capebedford, were licensed as lay-readers. By 1953 Gribble reported that he had baptised 1126, confirmed 1570, married 183 and buried 484.

The litany of Gribble's achievements are testimony to his energy, determination and dedication. Despite set-backs, his work appeared to satisfy ABM demands for impressive material, spiritual and cultural progress. The length of his career proves that ABM recognised his talents as a pioneering missionary. Yarrabah became the model for subsequent Anglican missionary ventures and missionaries were sent there to study his methods. Gribble was chosen by ABM's Brisbane Committee when a Warden was needed for the new Anglican mission at Fraser Island and Bishop White solicited his help in establishing the Mitchell River Mission on the Gulf of Carpentaria. Gribble was also the first choice to establish the Church Missionary Society mission at Roper River and to be superintendent of a new ABM mission at Edward River though he never filled these posts.

Gribble was flooded with accolades because of his achievements. Bishop White considered Yarrabah "one of the most remarkable instances of successful mission work in modern times". In a similar vein, Bishop Frodsham of North Queensland believed that "The success of Yarrabah...has shown that the natives can be saved physically, morally, and spiritually". Bishop Feetham of North Queensland believed Gribble "the

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53 Reports of the Synod of North Queensland, 1931-1957.
54 E.R. Gribble to Canon Needham, 8 November 1953, Gribble Papers, 8/12/1.
55 ABM Executive Council Minutes, 11 June 1908, ABM Archives, Sydney, Box 2, M2; 1928 Report, August 1929, vol.4, Box 5, M4.
56 Unidentified newspaper cutting, Gribble Papers, 13/20/4.
57 The Bishops of Carpentaria and North Queensland, Missionary Notes, 21 February 1903, p.11.
greatest living authority on the Aboriginal race" and claimed that Palm Island's "transformation since [Gribble's arrival] is amazing."58

The relative isolation of Yarrabah, Forrest River and Palm Island meant that word of Gribble's successes rarely spread outside Church circles. Occasionally, however, there were exceptions. In 1907, a speech by Bishop Frodsham was interpreted by some as an attempt to take credit for Yarrabah's development. The Cairns Morning Post sprang to Gribble's defence even though its editors were quick to criticise him on other occasions:

The whole of the North knows that it is to this gentleman's self-sacrifice and almost superhuman labour that Yarrabah is the model Aboriginal mission station in Australia today...Mr Gribble...has starved himself in order that he might carry out his great scheme for the regeneration of the aborigines of North Queensland...Rev. E.R. Gribble has raised to himself in Yarrabah a monument of fame...[he] has given up his whole life to the cause of the North Queensland Aborigines...the self-abnegating Rev. E.R. Gribble...[is] the one man who, first and last, should be honoured as the primal and final cause of the success of the mission.59

However, Gribble's record should not be accepted at face value. Gribble cultivated his image as a "successful" missionary, which suggests that recognition was fundamental to sustaining him in his life's work. He wrote glowing reports of his work for the ABM Executive and its journals as well as publishing six autobiographies (three in book form and the remainder serialized in newspapers and Church journals) in which he described and extolled his achievements and methods. The distance of Yarrabah, Forrest River and Palm Island from ABM's offices made it difficult to monitor his work closely or to verify his reports. But ABM was not blind nor totally ignorant. Gribble was criticised in private but ABM did not challenge his public persona. After all, donations depended on good press. In reality, many of Gribble's so-called successes do not stand close scrutiny.

58 Bishop Feetham to Canon Needham, undated copy, Gribble Papers, 8/12/5; 19 December 1945, ABM and Aborigines: Chairman's Correspondence relating to Palm Island, ABM Archives, Sydney, Series 4.

59 Morning Post, 18 January 1907, p.3.
Financial concerns dominated the operation of ABM, for the survival of missions depended on the generosity of Church members. However, racism and belief in the Aborigines' inevitable demise, made Aboriginal missions an unpopular cause compared with the "intense enthusiasm in more distant venture such as China, India and Africa". 60 Aboriginal missions were pressured to be self-supporting, and ambitious Gribble wanted materially impressive missions. Though he made "frequent mention...of the self-supporting powers" 61 of Yarrabah and Forrest River, neither became self-sufficient. The result was massive debts and financial chaos. In fact, Gribble was repeatedly reprimanded for accumulating unwarranted, unauthorized debts. 62 The debt on Yarrabah became so large that the ABM Executive threatened to publicly disclaim its responsibility. 63 In Western Australia, the local ABM Secretary wished that he "had nothing whatever to do with the finances of Forrest River Mission". 64 At Palm Island, Gribble's enthusiasm for building left St Georges with so large a debt that the Diocesan Secretary forced Gribble to do deputation work to reduce it. 65 Gribble's economic incompetence even extended into his personal life; his debt at the Palm

60 Missionary Notes, 15 February 1900, pp. 9, 74.
62 Ibid., ABM Executive Council Minutes, 10 December 1897 and 25 February 1989, Box 1, Series M2 also 2 March 1906, Box 2, Series M2.
63 ABM Executive Council Minutes, 25 February 1898, Box 1, Series M2; Rev. Hargraves, ABM Secretary, to E.R. Gribble, 28 February 1898 quoted in Rev. Dixon, ABM Secretary to E.R. Gribble, 13 December 1902, Gribble Papers, 7/11/3; E.R. Gribble to Rev. Hargraves, 24 February 1898, Gribble Papers, 14/20/6.
64 Mr Batchelor, ABM Secretary in Western Australia, to E.R. Gribble, 13 June 1922, Board of Missions Western Australia, Box 2/6. Also Canon Burton, ABM Secretary in Western Australia, to Canon Needham, 3 & 4 May 1927, Correspondence of ABM in Western Australia, Box 5.8.
65 C.E. Smith, North Queensland Diocesan Secretary, to E.R. Gribble, 21 September and 5 October 1939, Gribble Papers, 7/11/5.
Island store became so great that the administration threatened to cancel his credit.66

Many of his fundraising schemes cost more to implement than they earned. In 1921, a cost-benefit analysis of running sheep at Forrest River showed that the enterprise actually left the mission in debt by more than £46.67 Forrest River cotton won awards but cost ABM "thousands of pounds and six years [lost] labour". Characteristically, Gribble ignored advice to abandon cotton cultivation and in 1928 the mission's stock pile of cotton had to be burnt.68 As Canon Needham, ABM Chairman, accurately observed, Gribble had "large stores of experience...[but] he [was] not a business man".69

Gribble's success with conversions was also often illusory. He allowed only converted Aborigines to marry or assume positions of (nominal) responsibility within the mission hierarchy, policy that encouraged "rice Christians". Even Gribble realised that his hold on Aborigines often depended on providing food and tobacco.70 Despite evidence of some sincere conversions, many Aborigines adopted a dual position, paying token adherence to Christianity while maintaining allegiance to aspects of their culture disapproved of by the Church. After fourteen years at Forrest River, Gribble deposed five of his most trusted converts for participating in recent circumcision rites.71 Four confirmed men (i.e. 11% of the total confirmed)

66 Mr Cornell, Superintendent of Palm Island, to E.R. Gribble, 13 September 1932, Gribble Papers, 7/11/1.
67 Mr Freeman to Archdeacon Huddlestone, undated, Personal File, ABM Archives, Sydney.
68 Rev. Arthur Haining to ABM Secretary in Western Australia, 1 December 1928, Correspondence of ABM Western Australia, Box 5.8; Report by Rev. A.S. Webb, 28 February 1928, Correspondence of ABM Western Australia, Box 5.8.
69 Canon Needham to Canon Burton, St Thomas' Day 1927, Correspondence of ABM Western Australia, Box 5.8.
70 Cutting from the Australian Record, 1894, Gribble Papers, 13/20/4, Missionary Notes, 15 February 1896, p.12; E.R. Gribble, Forrest River Journal, 29 September 1927, MN545 2389A/14A; A.P. Elkin, Journal, 29 May 1928, Elkin Papers, Box 1, 1/1/1.
71 E.R. Gribble, Forrest River Journal, 21 August 1927, MN545,2389A/12A.
left the mission to fulfil traditional marriage obligations. Few of those confirmed spoke more than a little English, since none of the white missionaries spoke Aboriginal languages, the extent of the Aborigines' understanding of the Anglican rites of passage must be suspect. Even Gribble was forced to admit that most baptised men only stayed at the mission for a few months before leaving to find wives. At Yarrabah the pattern was similar although less extreme because longer contact with white society had caused greater cultural fragmentation. Still, many traditional customs continued. Converts would "abscond" to attend corroborees in Cairns, and the graveyard adjacent to the Church had to be moved because the people continued to fear spirits. In 1908, the year before Gribble's departure, he complained that there was still trouble with "silly old blackfellow things". John Barlow (Manmuny), the first Kongkandji to settle at Yarrabah and the man Gribble appointed "King of Yarrabah", abandoned his Christianity of ten years to perform customary burial rites after the death of his sister. Even at Palm Island, where Gribble's conversion rate was greatest, his assistant, Father Hubbard, resigned because adults were baptised "without adequate preparation" and because Gribble insisted that "numbers [were] essential whilst teaching doesn't matter". Indeed Gribble was obsessed with quantity rather than quality.

This is not to suggest that Gribble was not a committed Anglican; but while he spent his life as a clergyman he was not a spiritual man. Gribble's large volume of personal papers contain few religious writings and religious references in his journals are sparse. His staff complained that they received

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72 Report by Rev. A.S. Webb, 28 February 1928, Correspondence of ABM in Western Australia, Box 5.8.
73 A.P. Elkin to Sally Elkin, 13 May 1928, Elkin Papers, Box 216, 5/2, Item 1.
74 Western Australian Police File, Battye Library, Perth, AN 5/3 Acc. 430 4031/28. For a similar view see A.P. Elkin to Sally Elkin, 13 May 1928, as above.
76 Interview with Mrs M. Smith.
77 Aboriginal News, 15 June 1908.
78 Father Hubbard to E.R. Gribble, 3 November 1938, Gribble Papers, 8/12/2.
little "spiritual help...Nor [were] they likely to get it". For this reason, Canon Needham believed that "Mr. Gribble is not a priest...and is not likely to be one in the future...he knows little of the ideals of priesthood".

Gribble's lack of spiritual depth was, in part, a result of lack of education. Although brought up in a family where missionary zeal was pervasive, Gribble had no formal training for the priesthood and was given a simplified ordination exam so that he could minister at Yarrabah. He seemed to lack an intellectual understanding of Anglicanism and was preoccupied with temporal rather than spiritual concerns. His services became vehicles for secular ends during which he lectured Aborigines against leaving the mission, recited mission rules, directed work programmes, criticised staff and would scold his congregations during hour-long sermons. As a result, the Rev. Haining, Gribble's successor at Forrest River, found that "The religion of the natives...is not as real as one would wish". They had been instructed in a version of Christianity "based on a superstitious fear & a large percentage of hysteria".

Despite his financial mismanagement and questionable success with conversions, Gribble boasted of his achievements. He claimed that Yarrabah "stood at the top as regards results" and that St George's Palm Island saw its "hey-day" during his ministry. His myopic belief in himself made life intolerable for all but the most self-sacrificing and self-effacing

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79 Report by Canon Needham, ABM Board Meeting 22 & 23 August 1928, ABM Series M4, Box 5.
80 Ibid.
81 E.R. Gribble, Journal, 3 July 1905, Gribble Papers, 3/10/9; Rules and Regulations of Yarrabah, North Queensland Diocesan Archives, Townsville; Report by Canon Needham, ABM Board Meeting 22 & 23 August 1928, as above; Bishop Feetham to Canon Needham, 7 March 1940, Gribble Papers, 8/12/5. See also 16 July 1945, ABM and Aborigines: Chairman's Correspondence Relating to Palm Island 1945-1949, Series 4.
82 Rev. Arthur Haining to ABM Secretary in Western Australia, 1 December 1928, Correspondence of ABM in Western Australia, Box 5.8.
83 Rev. Arthur Haining to the Archbishop, 5 December 1928, ibid.
84 E.R. Gribble to Archdeacon Cowland, 12 December 1951, ibid., 8/12/2; E.R. Gribble to Archdeacon Robertson, ABM Chairman, 28 January 1952, ibid., 8/12/1.
of co-workers. He would not tolerate dissent and his responses were often violent. When a staff member at Yarrabah questioned his authority, Gribble "seized him by the neck and the seat of his pants and dropped him over the verandah on to the ground". Investigations into his administration of Forrest River, in 1928, found that relations with his staff "could not be more unhappy". He
...must have everything done his own way. He is quite incapable of bringing out the best in his fellow workers...he will not listen to any suggestion from anyone. A consultation of the staff is only a sham, none would dare to express an opinion if thought to be unacceptable to him. It would be met with the same old remark "I have had thirty-six years' experience, and I know".

Gribble's inability to deal with staff made Dr A.P. Elkin, the anthropologist and fellow clergyman, resolve that "no friend of mine will ever come to [Gribble] to be ground into a pancake, if I can help it". Gribble's failure to work amicably with others pushed most of the priests who assisted him at Palm Island into resigning. This made the Bishop of North Queensland desperate: "Is there a Priest anywhere who wants to go and work with Gribble?"

Anthropologists who questioned Gribble's expertise and methods were also a target for his wrath. When Professor Klaatsch, a German anthropologist, visited Yarrabah, Gribble dismissed his credentials:

Professor Klaatsch may be an accredited scientist, but...I have yet to learn if the measuring of a few heads can be taken before thirteen years experience and knowledge.

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85 E.R. Gribble, Typescript of Over the Years, ibid., 11/18/10.
86 A.P. Elkin to Sally Elkin, 13 May 1928, Elkin Papers, Box 216, 512, Item 1.
87 Report by Canon Needham, ABM Board Meeting, 22 & 23 August 1928, ABM Series M4, Box 5.
88 A.P. Elkin to Sally Elkin, 13 May 1928, as above.
89 Bishop Feetham, to Canon Needham, undated copy, Gribble Papers, 8/12/5. My emphasis.
90 Morning Post, 10 February 1905, p.3.
When Dr A.P. Elkin stayed at Forrest River, in 1928, Gribble complained that Elkin "gave himself airs" and that his "scientific training gave him...[no] right to teach those on the Mission how a Mission ought to be managed". As a result, Gribble developed a reputation amongst many of his contemporaries as "a most aggressive egotist [who] seems to imagine that he is not only the final but the only authority on how to treat the natives".

Gribble's conceit led him to believe that he was beyond the authority of the ABM Executive even though his judgement was often faulty and his self-confidence misplaced. In 1900, Gribble arranged for Yarrabah to be classified as an Industrial and Reformatory School for Aboriginal children. He was unabashed about his motives:

There are scores of children whom we wish to gather in...this being an industrial school for aboriginal children we can get them without any interference on the part of persons interested.

The news astonished the ABM Executive which had "not been consulted nor its consent obtained"; it censured Gribble for his presumption and demanded "an explanation". But the protests were futile; the reclassification of Yarrabah was a fait accompli. Loud and embarrassing opposition resulted. As Gribble was the Church's representative, criticisms of him were, by association, a direct attack on ABM and the Anglican Church. The Cairns Morning Post encapsulated the prevailing feeling:

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91 Report by Canon Needham, ABM Board Meeting, 22 & 23 August 1928, as above.
92 Canon Needham to Canon G. O'Keeffe, Headmaster of All Souls School, Charters Towers, 7 August 1931, Miscellaneous ABM Correspondence, ABM Archives Sydney, Box 1.27. For a similar view see A.P. Elkin, Journal, 29 May 1928, Elkin Papers, Box 1, 1/1/1.
94 ABM Executive Council Minutes, 13 July 1900, Series M2, Box 1; Rev. Dixon to E.R. Gribble, 2 July 1900, Gribble Papers, 7/11/3.
95 ABM Executive Council Minutes, 11 May 1900, 8 June 1900, 13 July 1900, Series M2, Box 1.
Powers have been transferred to [Gribble] which should never be extended
to anyone on this earth...Mr Gribble has torn children of tender years away
from their parents and virtually held them in slavery while the grief stricken
parents have gone on their unconsolated way...it is left in the hands of the Rev.
Gribble to travel throughout this district and separate child and parent,
brother and sister, forever...what excuse is to be put forward for the tyranny
that is exercised? 97

A similar scenario occurred at Fraser Island. The ABM Executive,
concerned that responsibility for Fraser Island would interfere with
Gribble's work at Yarrabah, insisted that he visit Sydney to discuss the
implications of his possible appointment as Warden. 98 Gribble ignored the
Executive's instructions, left immediately for Fraser Island and stayed three
months despite being chastised for having "committed an error in
judgement in leaving" Yarrabah without their authority and approval. 99

By the same token, convinced of the superiority of methods used at
Yarrabah, Gribble duplicated his programme at Fraser Island. He ignored
advice about the tribal composition of the mission residents, 100 agricultural
development of the island 101 and the medical problems of the Aborigines. 102

The result was

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97 *Morning Post*, 31 October 1902, p.2.
98 ABM Executive Council Minutes, 9 February 1900, Series M2, Box 1.
101 Report of Peter McLean, Agricultural Adviser, to the Queensland Home Secretary, 23
January 1901, *Fraser Island Transcripts*, Dept. of Anthropology, University of
Queensland, Brisbane.
Meston to the Queensland Home Secretary, 21 December 1900, Queensland State
Archives, Col/483a, 1900/19728; Superintendent Charles Kitchen to the Queensland
Home Secretary, November 1900 in R. Evans and J. Walker, "These Strangers, Where
are they going": Aboriginal-European Relations in the Fraser Island and Wide Bay
Region 1770-1905; *Occasional Papers in Anthropology*, no.8, March 1977, p.87. Report
on Earth Eating by Dr Penny of Maryborough, 21 February 1901, Queensland State
Archives, Col/A842, 1901/14623.
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a death-rate of one-half of the population in four years, continual complaints of want of food and clothing, the introduction of opium and a chronic discontent shown by repeated escapes from the island.\textsuperscript{103}

Even Gribble's ally, Dr Roth, the Queensland Chief Protector of Aborigines, admitted that the mission was a failure and recommended its closure.\textsuperscript{104} The Aboriginal residents were forcibly moved to Yarrabah and the government reserve of Durundur near Caboolture.

Gribble did not improve with age. In 1939, convinced of his expertise with boats, Gribble purchased a launch for St Georges, Palm Island, without the approval and to the aggravation of the Diocesan Council. Marine experts found the boat unsafe, in poor condition, unsuitable for Palm Island waters and useless in inclement weather. Gribble was told that it had to be sold.\textsuperscript{105}

At times, Gribble recognised that his work was not as successful as he presented. This realization manifested itself in periodic bouts of depression and mental collapse aggravated by exhaustion, overwork and recurring doubts about being a missionary. In 1909, a nervous breakdown led to Gribble's forced removal from Yarrabah. At Forrest River, he suffered from severe episodes of "depression [and] despondency"\textsuperscript{106} accompanied by the same vague illnesses he had experienced after agreeing to become a missionary. During these times, Gribble felt "out of touch with black and white".\textsuperscript{107} In 1925, negative reports from mission staff and Gribble's friend,

\textsuperscript{103} Archibald Meston, Unidentified newspaper cutting, Gribble Papers, 13/20/4. For similar criticisms see Police Magistrate Osborn to the Queensland Home Secretary in I. Noade and H.E. Aldridge to the Queensland Home Secretary, 14 July 1901, Education Department - Miscellaneous : Mission Schools File, Queensland State Archives; \textit{Morning Post}, 3 October 1902, p.5; Evans and Walker, "Where are they going", pp.87-89.

\textsuperscript{104} Recommendation by Dr Roth, Department of Lands Register of In-Letters, Queensland State Archives, 23 March 1904/Aborigines : 9290.

\textsuperscript{105} C.E. Smith, Queensland Diocesan Secretary, to E.R. Gribble, 8 October 1939, Gribble Papers, 7/11/5.


\textsuperscript{107} E.R. Gribble, Forrest River Journal, 28 March 1925, MN 545, 2389 A/11.
Dr Adams of Wyndham, prompted Bishop Trower of the North-West Diocese, to remove Gribble's license temporarily and force him to take a furlough.\textsuperscript{108} Four years later, Gribble was dismissed from Forrest River Mission after a second nervous breakdown. This time his depression was so intense that he talked of leaving the priesthood and returning to life as a drover.\textsuperscript{109} The pattern was repeated at Palm Island. The Bishop of North Queensland confided to the ABM Chairman:

...two months absence [from Palm Island] will not be enough to get Gribble back to his best normal disposition. You know that every so many years he is inclined to go 'off his rocker'. Well he has nearly been off it during the cyclone season for the last four or five years. This time he is rather worse than usual.\textsuperscript{110}

Gribble's methods reflected his authoritarian, patriarchal nature and the paternalism of the era. When the Queensland government appointed Gribble Superintendent of Yarrabah on 4 November 1899,\textsuperscript{111} he was delighted because the Superintendent "is sole judge of what should or should not be done within the reserve".\textsuperscript{112} On his missions, controls were placed on every aspect of daily life. The Yarrabah Rule Book consisted of twenty-seven, closely typed pages imposing regulations for every contingency. Work, leisure, schooling, church attendance, marriage, dress, baking bread, writing on walls and even bathing were covered. No detail was too petty to be ignored. The "Rules for Married People", for example, prescribed that

1. Tables be clean for every meal.
2. Basins, mugs, spoons, dishes to be cleaned at once after every meal.
3. Mugs are to be kept in the proper place.

\textsuperscript{108} Nurse Claridge to Canon Needham, 14 May 1925; Bishop Trower to Archdeacon Huddleston, ABM Chairman in Western Australia, 16 June 1925, Jack Gribble to Canon Needham, 15 & 30 March 1925; Telegram Bishop Trower to E.R. Gribble, 19 June 1925, Correspondence of ABM in Western Australia, Box 5.8.

\textsuperscript{109} Canon Needham, to E.R. Gribble, 9 August 1929, Gribble Papers, 7/11/2.

\textsuperscript{110} Bishop Feetham, to Canon Needham, 7 March 1940, Gribble Papers, 8/12/5.

\textsuperscript{111} Report of the Northern Protector of Aboriginals for 1899, \textit{Legislative Council Journal}, L1, Part II, 1900, p.797.

\textsuperscript{112} Dyott, \textit{Travels in Australia}, p.134. My emphasis.
4. Copper oven and fire places to be kept clean.
5. Tub for bread [to be kept] well clean.
6. Bread to be set each evening.
7. Flowers to be kept on meal table.
8. Table to be properly laid for meals.
9. Bread to be got from the store before bell rings.
10. No boys allowed in kitchen unless at work.\[113\]

Gribble's authoritarianism was reflected in the quasi-military management of his missions, a method of social control learnt during two years at the King's School, Parramatta. Military drill was part of the weekly routine because it induced "good discipline"\[114\] Aborigines in positions of responsibility were called 'officers'; heads of work teams were 'captains'. On meeting a missionary or officer, mission residents were required to salute; punishment for non-compliance included pack-drill and sentry duty.\[115\] In 1899, a Cadet Corps was established with Gribble as drill sergeant. A mission resident recalled that Gribble revelled in his role. He "dressed just like one of them...army man with his hat cocked up...and...his horse is flash and he ride rank[s]".\[116\]

Gribble married militarism and religion to produce his own overtly militaristic version of muscular Christianity. One of the first hymns Gribble taught was "Onward Christian Soldiers" while "Fight the Good Fight" was amongst his favourite texts. At Yarrabah, in 1904, Gribble established a branch of the Church Lads Brigade: an organisation which strove to inculcate the middle-class British values of "sobriety, thrift, self-help, punctuality [and] obedience" by adopting full military organisation, terminology and instructional methods.\[117\]

\[113\] Rules and Regulations of Yarrabah.
\[116\] Interview with Mrs M. Smith.
Uniforms were an important means of asserting Gribble's authority and social control because they depersonalized individuals by submerging them in the corporate identity of the mission community. At Yarrabah, the Cadets, Church Lads Brigade, Ambulance Brigade, Band, Fire Brigade and boat crews each had a special uniform. The mission residents also had a uniform: sulus for the man and voluminous, high-necked shifts for the women.¹¹⁸

Tight controls were imposed to enforce Gribble's authority. Rolls were called each night in the dormitories; Gribble vetted in-going and out-going mail, confiscated all money, sanctioned proposed marriages and his written authority was needed to move about the reserve.¹¹⁹ But the Aborigines did not passively acquiesce. Many sought escape. The exact number of absconders is unknown but the problem was substantial enough for Gribble to enlist the local police to enforce returns. Those who refused to obey Gribble's rules were punished. At Yarrabah, Gribble kept two straps, "Yellow Belly" and "Black Tom" which were used on children and adults alike.¹²⁰ Other punishments included head shaving, standing barefoot on the tin roof of the bakehouse all day, imprisonment and ostracism.¹²¹ Both Yarrabah and Forrest River had a gaol and Kobahra (Fitzroy Island) was used as a penal settlement for Yarrabah. Nor did Gribble shrink from using violence. He employed a stockwhip to enforce his rule and a number of Aborigines found their "back...in ribbons" after a beating from Gribble.¹²²

Gribble's authoritarianism pervaded even apparently democratic aspects of mission life. An Aboriginal Government and Court were established at Yarrabah¹²³ but neither had any real power. Gribble exercised a veto over those nominated as Court officers and thereby ensured that his supporters

¹¹⁸ *Missionary Notes*, 26 August 1901, p.7; 25 June 1907, p.48; *Morning Post*, 5 August 1907, p.5; *Western Australian Church News*, January 1923, p.3.

¹¹⁹ *Rules and Regulations of Yarrabah.*

¹²⁰ Interview with Mrs M. Smith.


¹²² Gribble, *Forty Years*, p.70; Interview with Mrs S. Foley.

¹²³ Gribble, *Forty Years*, p.163.
were elected. At meetings, the missionaries sat on the stage of the hall alongside the King, indicating their pre-eminence. Most of the laws enacted were suggested by missionaries and their "suggestions [were] almost invariably carried into effect; in fact, the missionary [was] something like the power behind the throne".124 Nor did Menmuny (John Barlow), Gribble's appointed "King of Yarrabah", have any real authority. Richard Dyott, a visitor to Yarrabah, reported that "The king...had no real power in the management of the mission, Mr G merely keeping him nominally at the head of affairs so as to use his influence for the good disciplining of the local tribe".125

Gribble's paternalistic authority was all pervasive; such extensive power and control would have been impossible in white society. Gribble relished authority and the attraction of total power was undoubtedly a crucial factor in sustaining the initially reluctant missionary throughout his career.

Gribble's missionary style reflected his attitude to Aborigines and was typical of many nineteenth century missionaries in Australia.126 Humanitarianism was integral. Gribble accepted the "doomed race" theory and considered it a moral obligation and "duty to soothe the pillow of a dying race".127 At the same time, he believed that missions could preserve the Aborigines "from utter extinction"128 and therefore Aborigines had "first claim upon the Church from a Missionary point of view".129

Yet Gribble's humanitarian motives were premised on the era's ethnocentrism: it was the responsibility of the white superior race to save and up-lift the Aborigines from their primitive condition. Intrinsic to this belief was a contempt for Aboriginal culture. Gribble felt that Aborigines

126 See N.A. Loos, Aboriginal-European Relations in North Queensland 1861-1897, PhD, James Cook University of North Queensland 1976; K.E. Evans, Missionary Effort towards the Cape York Aborigines 1886-1910, BA(Hons), University of Queensland 1969.
127 Gribble, *Forty Years*, pp.119-120.
128 Ibid.
129 *Northern Churchman*, 1 March 1931, p.2.
were a "degraded and depraved race";\textsuperscript{130} he described the Forrest River tribes as "very lazy, very dirty and very degraded in their habits and customs".\textsuperscript{131} He attacked marriage customs, death rites and initiation ceremonies in both practice and print.\textsuperscript{132} Dismissing Aboriginal culture as superstition, he considered it an achievement to announce "that there is so such thing as superstition amongst our Yarrabah folk today".\textsuperscript{133} Lack of understanding prevented him from appreciating the richness of Aboriginal cultural life. He even condemned the didgeridoo whose sound he found "monotonous...awful [and] most objectionable".\textsuperscript{134}

Contempt for Aboriginal culture was accompanied by implicit belief in the intellectual inferiority of Aborigines. At the turn of the century, Gribble was more enlightened than many contemporaries, arguing that the Aborigines "possessed...a degree of intelligence by no means low";\textsuperscript{135} but he was essentially ethnocentric and believed that the Aborigines could only reach a "fairly high stage of development" provided they were outside traditional life in a more "suitable environment".\textsuperscript{136} Occasionally, he was more blatant. In the\textit{Aboriginal News}, he explained that he was writing for people of Yarrabah "hence I must be as simple as possible".\textsuperscript{137} Though he campaigned for Aboriginal education, he never considered Aborigines the intellectual equals of whites. The James Noble Fund was not established because Gribble considered Aborigines entitled to the same opportunities and rights as white children or to provide the skills for success in a wider society. Rather it was "to train Aboriginal boys and girls with a view to fitting them for positions on Aboriginal missions and settlements".\textsuperscript{138} The

\textsuperscript{130} Gribble,\textit{ Problem of the Australian Aborigines}, p.121.
\textsuperscript{131} \textit{A.B.M. Review}, 15 July 1919, p.47.
\textsuperscript{132} Gribble,\textit{ Problem}, pp.29, 47-49; \textit{Missionary Notes}, 18 December 1896, p.107.
\textsuperscript{133} Gribble,\textit{ Problem}, p.89.
\textsuperscript{134} \textit{Ibid.}, p.53.
\textsuperscript{135} \textit{Ibid.}, p.115.
\textsuperscript{136} Gribble,\textit{ Forty Years}, p.115. My emphasis.
\textsuperscript{137} \textit{Aboriginal News}, 15 March 1908.
\textsuperscript{138} E.R. Gribble to the Director of Native Affairs, 4 November 1945, Gribble Papers, 8/11/6.
intended role of the Fund's recipients was "to help in the 'up-lift' of the 'Remnant that is left.'\textsuperscript{139} He was often surprised when Aborigines conformed to European standards of acceptable behaviour because they were "only Australian Aborigines".\textsuperscript{140}

Gribble believed that supplanting Aboriginal values with European culture was inseparable from the Christianising process and the success of a mission. He sought to disrupt the Aborigines' social structures, undermining the status of elders by ridicule and insult\textsuperscript{141} and preventing the transmission of culture by isolating children in dormitories. Men who took their promised brides from the mission were hunted down and the girls returned by force. Gribble insisted that polygamous men discard all but one wife before joining his missions.\textsuperscript{142} Any mission Aborigine who sought to maintain traditional cultural ties was forcefully opposed and punished. At Forrest River, Gribble warned the Aborigines "that he would drive back with a stockwhip any mission man who went outside the compound to the old men's camps".\textsuperscript{143} He made no effort to learn language and insisted that mission residents speak English; "the learning of native languages and law was not his business".\textsuperscript{144}

Gribble was open about his intention to "Europeanize the Natives".\textsuperscript{145} He argued that it was essential to gather the Aborigines on to missions, by force if necessary, and segregate them from white society. Once on the mission the "fundamental idea [was to provide] a permanent home...[in which] everything necessary in a community has been established...their own Court of Justice, cricket, football and rifle clubs". Only thus could the

\textsuperscript{139} \textit{Northern Churchman}, June 1944, p.15.
\textsuperscript{140} Gribble, \textit{Forty Years}, p.101.
\textsuperscript{141} \textit{Ibid.}, pp.87-88.
\textsuperscript{143} Elkin, Report on Forrest River Mission 1928, Correspondence of ABM in Western Australia, Box 5.8.
\textsuperscript{144} \textit{Ibid.} For a similar view see Dixon, \textit{A Grammar of Yidin}, pp.23-24.
\textsuperscript{145} Elkin, Report on Forrest River Mission 1928.
Aborigines "be taught to conduct themselves better and attain to a higher state of life".  

Common at the turn of the century, this outlook was becoming anachronistic by the end of the 1920s. Dr A.P. Elkin visited Forrest River Mission in 1928 and reported on Gribble's administration to the Chairman of the ABM and A.O. Neville, the Western Australian Chief Protector of Aborigines. Elkin fiercely attacked the policy of Europeanisation and the isolation of children from tribal culture:

this giving up of children means a lot to the blacks. They are very fond of them and they know that once the child is in the mission, he or she will not be allowed out again except for a few hours on a holiday under the supervision of a missionary, that later on the child will be married contrary to the tribal laws and promises made by parents and that finally the child becomes a complete outsider to all tribal culture.  

He condemned Gribble's deliberate attempts to undermine the transmission of culture and criticised the mission staff's ignorance of Aboriginal language and customs:

I am sorry to say that no member of the white staff had a knowledge of more than a few odd words of the language and no real knowledge of the customs.

Elkin reported that there was "rather too much repression and...a little terrorising in the attitude [of] the missionaries towards the inmates". For instance, couples were married soon after puberty but barely knew each other before the ceremony. Because such marriages often violated tribal laws, married women were confined to the girls' compound during the day and were barred from picnics for fear that they would run off with their promised tribal husbands. It was not surprising, Elkin explained, that Forrest River Mission became known as "Gribble's stud farm".

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146 Gribble, Forty Years, p.122.
148 Ibid.
149 Ibid.
150 A.P. Elkin to Sally Elkin, 13 May 1928, Elkin Papers, Box 216, 5/2, Item 1.
Canon Needham visited Forrest River Mission and confirmed Elkin's criticisms; Gribble was told to reform his administration immediately.\textsuperscript{151} The Chief Protector, A.O. Neville was also critical. He insisted on "The observance of native culture and tribal practices" and condemned "the evil [practice] of...separating children from their parents".\textsuperscript{152}

Elkin's criticisms, and the support they received, were symptomatic of broader changes in white attitudes to Aboriginal culture and missionary methodology. An increased awareness of the richness of Aboriginal culture, led by anthropologists largely under the tutelage and guidance of Elkin, slowly stimulated a more tolerant and sympathetic approach to missionary work. Although assimilation did not become government policy until the 1950s, from the second decade of the twentieth century there was increasing pressure, inside and outside the Church, for assimilation rather than segregation. Gribble's attitudes and methods remained locked in the nineteenth century and conceit made him reluctant to change; until his death he remained a staunch advocate of segregation and an outspoken opponent of assimilation.\textsuperscript{153}

Although criticism can be levelled at Gribble, it is important not to lose sight of the positive results of his work. His missions provided a refuge for Aboriginal groups from the onslaught and expansion of white settlement. At Yarrabah, many Aborigines acquired the skills and a rudimentary education that enabled them to survive in an environment inextricably changed by the white invasion. In Western Australia, Gribble courageously defended the Aborigines, despite widespread white opposition and even threats on his life.\textsuperscript{154} In 1926, he publicly campaigned for an investigation into a massacre of Aborigines by police; his persistence forced a Royal

\textsuperscript{151} Report by Canon Needham, ABM Board Minutes, 22-23 August 1928, Series M4, Box 4. Later Needham clarified ABM's attitude to the preservation of traditional life and the treatment of children. See Canon Needham to Rev. Bird, undated, \textit{ibid.}, Box 5.8.

\textsuperscript{152} Minutes of ABM Perth Diocesan Committee, 29 October 1928, Board of Missions, Western Australia, M1.

\textsuperscript{153} See for example Motion for the North Queensland Synod, 6 July 1939, Gribble Papers, 2/18/25; also \textit{Northern Churchman}, July 1935, p.16.

\textsuperscript{154} Elkin, Report on Forrest River Mission 1928.
Commission which proved his charges and led to the trial of two policemen. At the Wyndham Magistrates' Court, accused Aborigines found a defence advocate in Gribble. At Palm Island, the James Noble Fund gave Anglican Aboriginal children the opportunity for secondary education at a time when schooling on Aboriginal settlements stopped at Grade 5. Gribble also spoke out against abuses in the administration of Palm Island particularly gambling, immorality and the placement of Aboriginal girls in domestic service. He did not shirk from writing directly to the Chief Protector and the Association for the Protection of Native Races to make similar complaints. On one occasion, Gribble's concern for the Aborigines even led to a reprimand from the Chief Protector for smuggling letters from Aborigines wanting to leave Palm Island.

Under Gribble's tutelage the beginnings of an indigenous Anglican church emerged. Aborigines Gribble worked with were amongst the first licensed black lay-readers and representatives to an Anglican Synod. In 1925, James Noble became Australia's first Aboriginal Anglican deacon; Allen Polgen, who was sponsored by the James Noble Fund, became an officer in the Church Army. They began an Aboriginal ministry that leads directly to the Yarrabah-born Right Rev. Arthur Malcolm, Australia's first Aboriginal Anglican Bishop.

Underlying Gribble's ethnocentrism and personal weaknesses was a powerful humanitarian devotion to the Aborigines. It is for this reason that so many Aborigines regard Gribble with respect. An eye-witness account of Gribble's last days stands as testimony to their affection:

The few days before the end was the most amazing I have ever witnessed. I think everyone in Yarrabah came to see him and knelt by his bed as if it

155 Northern Churchman, 1 July 1935, p.12; E.R. Gribble to Mr Julian of Fantome Island, 10 May 1935, Gribble Papers, 8/12/1; E.R. Gribble, St Georges Mission at Palm Island, unpublished typescript, Gribble Papers, 10716/2; Northern Churchman, July 1935, p.15.


24. Rev. Gribble with a newly wed couple at Forrest River Mission
25. Rev. Gribble at the Rectory of St George's Mission Palm Island
was an altar. At one time about 50 young boys and youths passed through his room noiselessly bowed to him or kissed him softly & whispered "Good-night" or "God bless you Dadda Gribble". There couldn't have been more reverence if it had been a church. Indeed it reminded me of the passing of the late King George VI in England & his subjects coming to pay homage.\[158\]

During his remarkably long career, Gribble's public image was that of a successful missionary even though many of those successes were illusory or misrepresented and his methods and attitudes becoming increasingly dated. At a personal level, Ernest Gribble was not a likeable man. He was authoritarian, ethnocentric, difficult to work with and egotistical. He was sustained in his career by a complex amalgam of duty to his father, the appeal of power, paternalistic humanitarianism and faith in his own abilities. At the same time, he suffered from periodic episodes of mental turmoil: the continuation of a deeper self-doubt that began with his reluctant entry into missionary work. The dichotomy between his public persona and his personal qualities makes Gribble an intriguing and controversial character. Recognising his flaws should not diminish his achievements but Gribble's public image as a successful missionary is naive. The real Ernest Gribble was a far more complex man. Paradoxically, his complicated nature parallels much of the history of the ABM's missions to the Australian Aborigines.

\[158\] Sally Wilcot to Mrs E.R. Gribble, 21 October 1957, copy in the possession of this author.