‘Australia’s Shadow Side’: Arthur Vogan and The Black Police

Through the analysis of book, manuscript and newspaper resources in the Fryer Library, Mark Cryle sheds light on a sensational exposé of the activities of the Queensland Native Police published more than one hundred years ago.
Arthur James Vogan was born in England in 1859 but migrated with his family to Te Puke in the Bay of Plenty region of New Zealand where he grew up. He trained as a surveyor and also worked as a journalist and illustrator with the *Auckland Star* and the *Bay of Plenty Times*. In 1885, at the age of twenty-six, he volunteered to join an expedition to New Guinea funded by the Geographical Society of Australasia. His voyage north from Sydney on board the *Bonito* in July 1885, with stops in Brisbane, Rockhampton, Bowen, Townsville, and Cooktown, would appear to have been his first venture into Queensland. It was not his last. Between 1886 and 1889 he undertook a number of trips in his role as correspondent for the *Auckland Star* and the *Bay of Plenty Times*. In 1889, Vogan accepted an offer from the proprietor of the *Auckland Star* to publish a book on the subject at ‘half-profits’. The Star’s editor, Thomson Leys, suggested to Vogan that he write it as a novel, ‘as being a more popular form, and likely to command a larger and more sympathetic audience than one on other lines might be’. For reasons that are now lost the New Zealand project was abandoned. Instead, the book was published in 1890 in London by Hutchinson with a lurid cover depicting a manacled, half-naked black woman being flogged by a booted, well-dressed black male. It also included an introductory note from Vogan:

*In the following story I have endeavoured to depict some of the obscure portions of Australia’s shadow side. The scenes and main incidents employed are chiefly the result of my personal observations and experiences; the remainder are from perfectly reliable sources.*

In Vogan’s ‘novel with a purpose’, as it was advertised, the hero, Claude Angland, a New Zealander, travels to north Queensland via Sydney, following the trail of a mysterious encoded letter he received from his dying uncle. The plot is flimsy. With a series of adventures and highly unlikely coincidences, Claude thwarted the nefarious intentions of the squatter, Sir Wilson Giles; the squatter’s villainous niece, Lileth Mundella; and her suitor, Inspector Putt of the Native Police. He finds the secret mine his uncle had discovered and wins the girl, Glory. There are frequent diversions from the main story during which Vogan employs a range of narrative devices to give sensational accounts of the activities of the Native Police and of the colonists’ treatment of the Aborigines—flash-backs; stories told by incidental characters; letters written by Claude to his friend in New Zealand; and the reproduction of actual newspaper articles, some of which Vogan himself had authored.

Vogan was horrified by the treatment of Indigenous Australians that he witnessed on his travels. In particular, he was outraged by the brutalities perpetrated by the Native Police and the ongoing denial of basic human rights that he witnessed on the pastoral frontier. He authored an article for the *Illustrated London News* depicting what he called ‘the atrocities committed upon the aborigines’ which was returned to him as ‘unsuitable for our columns’. He was determined however to ‘ventilate the subject’, and did so by writing to a number of colonial newspapers, including the *Brisbane Courier* on the matter.

On a trip back to New Zealand in 1890, Vogan accepted an offer from the proprietor of the *Auckland Star* to publish a book on the subject at ‘half-profits’. The Star’s editor, Thomson Leys, suggested to Vogan that he write it as a novel, ‘as being a more popular form, and likely to command a larger and more sympathetic audience than one on other lines might be’. For reasons that are now lost the New Zealand project was abandoned. Instead, the book was published in 1890 in London by Hutchinson with a lurid cover depicting a manacled, half-naked black woman being flogged by a booted, well-dressed black male. It also included an introductory note from Vogan:

*In the following story I have endeavoured to depict some of the obscure portions of Australia’s shadow side. The scenes and main incidents employed are chiefly the result of my personal observations and experiences; the remainder are from perfectly reliable sources.*

In Vogan’s ‘novel with a purpose’, as it was advertised, the hero, Claude Angland, a New Zealander, travels to north Queensland via Sydney, following the trail of a mysterious encoded letter he received from his dying uncle. The plot is flimsy. With a series of adventures and highly unlikely coincidences, Claude thwarted the nefarious intentions of the squatter, Sir Wilson Giles; the squatter’s villainous niece, Lileth Mundella; and her suitor, Inspector Putt of the Native Police. He finds the secret mine his uncle had discovered and wins the girl, Glory. There are frequent diversions from the main story during which Vogan employs a range of narrative devices to give sensational accounts of the activities of the Native Police and of the colonists’ treatment of the Aborigines—flash-backs; stories told by incidental characters; letters written by Claude to his friend in New Zealand; and the reproduction of actual newspaper articles, some of which Vogan himself had authored.

Vogan based the incidents he recounted on real events and at least one of his central characters was based on a real person. One scene in the book describes the flogging, authorised by Sir Wilson Giles, of two Aboriginal servant girls for a minor misdemeanour. Vogan later recalled that in 1889 he ‘saw a native girl tied to a verandah post at Sandringham Station (Acres & Field) and flogged with fencing wire’. She was, he states elsewhere, ‘one of the squatter’s harem at Pitchuri Creek’. Curiously, correspondence survives between the manager of that property, WG Field and the Geographical Society of Australasia in which Field defends his own integrity, and complains that Vogan was ‘biting the hand that fed him’ and that Vogan’s behaviour while travelling through the area was ‘eccentric’ and ‘objectionable’. On page 143 of the book the reader is introduced to Giles, one of the principal villains, of Murdaro Station [Murdaro Station [Murder Row?] in Queensland. In the margin of one of Fryer’s copies of the book, written in Vogan’s hand beside Giles’s name are the words, ‘Field of Acres & Field, Sandringham Station, 500,000 acres, Pitchuri Creek’. This book was a big success and was reprinted in 1893, again with a lurid cover depicting a manacled, manacled, half-naked black woman being flogged by a booted, well-dressed black male. It also included an introductory note from Vogan:

*In the following story I have endeavoured to depict some of the obscure portions of Australia’s shadow side. The scenes and main incidents employed are chiefly the result of my personal observations and experiences; the remainder are from perfectly reliable sources.*
The black police is a sensational, polemical exposé intended, as historian Raymond Evans has noted, ‘to arouse a groundswell of scandalised liberal consciences, locally and overseas’. From his subsequent correspondence it is clear that Vogan valued his work less for its literary skill than for its power to effect social change. It was, he claimed, the reason the Queensland government established the ‘Karabah [sic] reservation’.

Reviews were divided. One New Zealand newspaper claimed that The black police ‘stirred the whole of Queensland and opened the eyes of the Australian world to the heinous crimes by the black and white butchers employed by the Queensland Government in the Native Mounted Police Force’. However, the Brisbane Courier reviewed it with feigned indifference, claiming that it simply rehashed ‘the old familiar stories’ and noting that ‘the general tenor of the book is to heighten the bad impression of the Queensland Native Police, especially outside of Queensland’. The reviewer’s indifference, however, did not prevent him from quibbling over the misspelling of ‘Croydon’ and the unlikelihood of the Aboriginal woman depicted on the cover having long flowing hair.

While the book may not have had the immediate impact on policy makers and governments that Vogan had hoped, it did have a significant impact on his own career—to its detriment. Vogan claimed in subsequent correspondence that he was unable to get work as a journalist and had to give up writing for a living. ‘I need hardly say I have made numberless enemies in consequence of the step I deemed it only right of me to take’. He was, he claimed, a ‘marked man’ who ‘suffered thro’ advocating the cause of mercy for the aborigines’. One newspaper report noted rumours that a ‘price was set’ on Vogan’s life.

While some of his later correspondence suggests that Vogan felt that his was something of a one-man crusade, he was, in fact, part of a tradition of writing and advocacy for the amelioration of the condition of the Aborigines which was quite strong in colonial Australia. In This whispering in our hearts, Henry Reynolds gives an account of the lives and activities of those who followed their consciences and sought to explode the conspiracy of silence which surrounded these frontier activities. Like many of those involved, Vogan appears to have become something of a pariah.
Yet Vogan was atypical of those who advocated better treatment of the Aborigines. As Reynolds points out, the principal advocates were urban-based liberals many of whom were clergymen or had very strong connections with the church. Vogan, on the other hand, was very much the outdoors type. An adventurer and explorer, he later served as a scout in the Boer War where he distinguished himself by capturing a leading Boer commander. He was, by one account, ‘a man fond of thrilling experiences’. By his own admission he had ‘shot natives who would otherwise have shot him’ and was not a ‘religious man’.

After the publication of The black police, Vogan moved to Western Australia where he worked in the mining industry. He later returned to Sydney where he continued to agitate for Aboriginal rights into the twentieth century through his involvement with the Association for the Protection of Native Races. Vogan died in Manly District Hospital on 27 February 1948. In a letter written in 1913 he made reference to his ‘long-forgotten book’. However, almost a hundred years later it is still being read and continues to provide valuable insights into this grisly phase in Queensland’s past.

References
2. The Observer (Auckland), 26 October 1901, p. 16.
3. New Zealand Free Lance, 26 October 1901, p. 3.
8. AJ Vogan to the Editor, 4 September 1891, reprinted Anti-Slavery Reporter, vol. 11, no. 5, September 1891, p. 234.
9. Ibid.
12. Evening Post (Wellington), 1 September 1891, p. 3.
18. Fryer Library, University of Queensland Library, AJ Vogan to George Earp, 4 February 1913, UQFL 2/2581. Vogan is likely referring to the Yarrabah Mission established near Cairns in 1893.
22. AJ Vogan to George Earp.
24. AJ Vogan to George Earp.
25. Henry Reynolds, This whispering in our hearts, Allen & Unwin, St Leonards, 1996.
26. Ibid.
27. The Observer (Auckland), 26 October 1901, p. 16.
28. Ibid.

MARK CRYLE is Manager of the Fryer Library but is currently working on the Queensland’s Past Online project, a Q150 initiative, in conjunction with the Centre for the Government of Queensland.