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# DOGGERERS

## *in the north-west*

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*In an attempt to eliminate dingoes in the pastoral lands, the South Australian Government passed the Wild Dogs Act in 1912 which introduced bounty payments for dingo scalps. Police officers and other government officials could receive the scalps and authorise payment of the bounty. The bounty was initially five shillings per scalp but by the late 1920s it had risen to 7/6. By that time, similar bounty schemes were also operating in Western Australia and the Northern Territory.*

Throughout South Australia, outback workers supplemented their meagre wages with dingo scalps, and other men took up dogging full-time, shooting dingoes or catching them in traps baited with strychnine. Within a few decades, doggers had virtually wiped out dingoes inside the dog-proof fence, making that area safe for sheep. Doggers also operated outside the fence, in the pastoral lands in the far north and west of the state, and by the mid 1920s the more adventurous ones were travelling – in fact, trespassing – through the North-West Aboriginal Reserve and beyond, into the Western Australian and Northern Territory Aboriginal Reserves.

There doggers found it more profitable to employ local Aboriginal people to obtain scalps for them. Their hunting skills and knowledge of dingo habits enabled them to obtain many more scalps than any white man could hope to get with his rifle and traps. In exchange for scalps, doggers traded flour, sugar, tobacco, clothing, knives and other items to the Aboriginal people, but it was rare for the exchange to be a fair one. The same bounty was paid for an adult dingo scalp as for a young scalp. Aboriginal hunters would track a female dingo to its lair and there get four or

five puppies, which were eaten as a traditional delicacy, and then trade the scalps to the next dogger who passed through. The pup season, from August to September, was the time that many doggers made their round of the central reserves.

One of the first to try his luck dogging in the central reserves was Reg ('R. M.') Williams, who later achieved fame and fortune as a leather-worker. In 1928, he made two dogging expeditions with a mate and a string of camels through the Musgrave, Mann, Rawlinson and Warburton Ranges, trading for scalps with Aboriginal people. He returned from both expeditions with several hundred scalps and his success inspired other men working on the pastoral stations north-west of Oodnadatta to take up dogging.

One of them was Stan Ferguson. He had had a lease in the Everard Range but went broke during the drought of the late 1920s. He took up dogging then and later, in about 1931, he sank a successful well at Ernabella in the Musgrave Range. At that time any pastoralist who sank a good well in the marginal pastoral lands was eligible for a Government grant of a 100 square mile lease at peppercorn rental, and a

£200 cash reward. Ferguson claimed the lease and reward. By 1933 he had built a homestead at Ernabella and lived there with his Aboriginal wife and children; he was also running about 900 sheep. By that time Ferguson was no longer dogging himself, but it seems that he controlled much of the trade in the north-west corner of the state.

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Other doggers included Alan Brumby (Ferguson's nephew), Harold Brown, Paddy De Conlay and Victor Dumas. They were all practical, experienced bushmen and most were familiar with Aboriginal customs and languages. Many already had, or soon acquired Aboriginal wives, who helped in establishing trading networks with local people. Doggers returned year after year to the same places to trade and it was in each man's own best interests to maintain good relations with the local people. However, the doggers operated far beyond the reach of British law. They all shamelessly exploited the Aboriginal people economically and some occasionally committed rape, murder and other crimes.

Allan Brumby and Harold Brown had been encouraged by R. M. Williams' stories to take up dogging in partnership. In about 1929 they went west on a dogging and prospecting trip through the Musgrave and Mann Ranges and north to Ayers Rock. During the early 1930s they made several other trips through the central reserves. Brown sank a successful well near Officer Creek, south of the Musgrave Range, in about 1933 and claimed the government reward. He constructed a mud hut and a dug-out at Shirley Well and ran some sheep, but continued to make long dogging trips westwards. Brown had an Aboriginal wife and several children but in 1934 he married a white woman in Alice Springs. He abandoned his Aboriginal wife and their children, and his new wife joined him at Shirley Well. Allan Brumby also had an

Aboriginal wife with whom he had four children. He abandoned them in 1935 when he married a white woman.

By the early 1930s Paddy De Conlay and Victor Dumas, were also travelling - trespassing - widely through the central reserves. In 1933 they struck water at a bore west of Ernabella and claimed the lease and the government reward. They named the station 'Upsan Downs' and built a mud hut there. De Conlay seems to have had a succession of Aboriginal wives and fathered at least two part-Aboriginal children. In 1936 Dumas took up his own lease at Red Ochre Well, on the northern side of the Musgraves.

When he was at Ernabella in 1940 the South Australian anthropologist, Charles Mountford, was told by Pitjantjatjara people that De Conlay had, in about October 1936, deliberately poisoned some people in the Petermann Ranges by leaving them a bag of flour laced with strychnine. Mountford later reported what he had heard to the Aborigines Protection Board, but the Board decided to take no action.

By the mid 1930s, Oodnadatta was the centre of the dogging trade in the north-west, but other doggers operated out of Kalgoorlie, Wiluna and Fitzroy Crossing or from Alice Springs and Tennant Creek. As Western Australia paid a higher bounty than South Australia, doggers from our north-west sometimes travelled to Kalgoorlie or Wiluna to hand in their scalps there. By 1934, more than 500,000 scalps had been received by the authorities from the pastoral frontier zones of SA, WA and the NT, and a total of £344,000 had been paid in bounties. Official figures show that in 1935, an average year for the doggers, nearly 4000 scalps - worth £1,500 - were sent in by the lessees of Ernabella, Upsan Downs and Shirley Well.

In 1935 McLean, the Chief Protector of Aborigines in Adelaide, advised his Minister that doggers were encouraging the detribalisation of the Aboriginal people on the reserve by disrupting their traditional lifestyle, and that many of these white men were cohabiting with Aboriginal women, and fathering children of mixed-descent. McLean urged that the police be instructed to prevent doggers trespassing on the reserve. The Police Inspector in Port Augusta,

however, advised that it was impossible for the police at Oodnadatta to effectively patrol such a vast area.

The fight was taken up by Dr Charles Duguid, a tireless campaigner for Aboriginal rights. In 1935 he visited the north-west himself and was appalled by what he saw - white men openly living with Aboriginal women, or sometimes girls, and children of mixed descent living in station camps. Duguid lobbied the State Government and his own Presbyterian Church to establish a mission on the reserve, to act as a buffer against further detribalisation. His efforts resulted in the Presbyterian Board of Missions acquiring from Ferguson in December 1936 his Ernabella lease, plus the homestead, several timbered wells and livestock, comprising 2000 sheep, 200 goats, 16 horses and four camels.

In September 1938 the Superintendent at Ernabella, Reverend Taylor, was appointed the official receiver of scalps on the reserve. Aboriginal hunters soon learned that they received full payment of 7/6 from him, rather than the handful of flour or an old shirt they might have received from a white dogger. The Oodnadatta police were also instructed to take action against anyone trespassing on the reserve. The white doggers soon found it impossible to operate there and the industry collapsed, virtually overnight.

**...[it was] illegal for a white man to 'habitually consort with an Aboriginal female'...**

Ferguson left Ernabella in 1936 and moved across the border to the Northern Territory. His nephew, Allan Brumby, seems to have joined him there. Harold Brown died with his wife when their dugout at Shirley Well collapsed on them during a heavy rainstorm in 1939. Their young son, asleep in the hut nearby with an Aboriginal nanny, was not injured. Later that year, the *Aborigines Act* was amended, making it illegal for a white man to 'habitually consort with an Aboriginal female'. As soon as the amendments were passed, a number of prosecutions were launched in the north-west. Several small-time doggers - the O'Donoghue brothers at De Rose Hill for example - were subsequently convicted for consorting.

De Conlay abandoned Upsan Downs in 1939. He moved north across the border and became head stockman at Kulgera Station. In 1941 he and the owner, Bert Kitto, were charged with the particularly violent murder of an Aboriginal employee. They were acquitted when the police could not produce the victim's body, nor any of the Aboriginal witnesses to the crime. De Conlay married a white woman in the early 1940s and later established a station near Mt Conner. Dumas left Red Ochre Well in 1939 and later ended up working for his old mate De Conlay at Mt Conner.

The dogging trade played an important role in the development of the pastoral industry in the north-west. In this paper I have focused on those few men - Ferguson, Brumby, Brown, De Conlay and Dumas - who dominated the trade in the far north-west corner but many other station-owners, managers and working men turned to dogging during the difficult times of the late 1920s and early 1930s. Several stations that still operate today - De Rose Hill, Tieyon, Macumba and Welbourn Hill, for example - may owe their survival during that period to the dogging trade.

By the mid 1930s doggers operating from Oodnadatta, Alice Springs, Fitzroy Crossing and Kalgoorlie had penetrated all but the most remote parts of the central deserts. They were often the first to open up reliable tracks across the Aboriginal reserves, tracks that were followed later by missionaries, prospectors, anthropologists, geologists and other travellers. The doggers were the first white men to have sustained contacts with the Aboriginal people of the central reserves, and there is a rich Aboriginal oral history of these early meetings, stories by Pitjantjatjara and Ngaanyatjarra people of the first time they tasted sugar, of putting on clothes for the first time, or their first close encounter with the white man's horses and camels. However, Aboriginal oral history and, sometimes, documentary sources too, also record the darker side of these early contacts; stories of shootings, poisonings, rape and other crimes committed by the doggers.

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