

'In view of the obvious animus'. The discrediting of Ralph Piddington

Geoffrey Gray

In March 1934 AO Neville, Chief Protector of Aborigines in Western Australia, addressed the Royal Commissioner who had been appointed to 'investigate, report and advise upon matters in relation to the condition and treatment of Aborigines' in Western Australia. Pat Jacobs, Neville's biographer, relates a version of events which Neville was eager to convey:

Neville gave [H.D.] Moseley [the Royal Commissioner] the background to some of the more damaging personal criticisms he had had to bear with. He mentioned [Ralph] Piddington, [A.P.] Elkin's research student, who had displayed some erratic behaviour while in Western Australia—causing Elkin concern. He'd been seen drunk and waving the *red flag*! His file was handed to Moseley without comment by Neville; what it contained was, by inference, enough to discredit his criticism of Neville.¹

Jacobs' narrative highlights the successful attempt by Neville to discredit Piddington by scrutinising his personal behaviour, to avert the veracity of the allegations made by Piddington, and the inadequacies of Neville's department. By this strategy the seriousness of the allegations made by Piddington about the ill-treatment and conditions of Aborigines at La Grange Bay in Northwest Western Australia are expunged.

Piddington's allegations were serious.² They dealt with the sexual violation of Aboriginal women, beatings of both Aboriginal men and women, a fight between an Aboriginal man and a white man 'over' an Aboriginal woman, provision of alcohol to Aborigines, and the misappropriation of government rations designated for aged and infirm Aboriginal people. He claimed that the abuses at La Grange were typical of the state affairs in Western Australia generally.³ It is my contention that there was a deliberate effort by Neville to mislead the Australian National Research Council (ANRC), his

1. Jacobs 1991, p. 226. Piddington was not Elkin's research student. Piddington's research was supervised by A.R. Radcliffe-Brown and S.D. Porteus. Piddington had left for London in September 1932. See also Wise 1985, p. 115, whose error appears to be replicated by Jacobs. Cf Gray 1994, pp. 217–245.

2. A earlier paper, (Gray 1994), examined why, particularly in the first half of this century, Australian academics were so supine when it came to making public criticism of the treatment, conditions and welfare of Aborigines. For Piddington's detailed allegations see Gray 1994, pp. 222–225.

Minister (W.H. Kitson) and the Royal Commissioner (H.D. Moseley), with regard to the substance of Piddington's allegations, and with regard to the recommendations made by a departmental inquiry and police reports. The consequences for Piddington were considerable. With the exception of a short period with the Australian army's Directorate of Research and Civil Affairs between 1944 and 1946 Piddington never worked in Australia again.

The ANRC, the body responsible for sending anthropological researchers to the field,⁴ uncritically accepted Neville's charges regarding Piddington's 'erratic and intemperate' behaviour. Neither the ANRC Executive Committee nor its Committee for Anthropology interrogated Piddington's allegations of ill-treatment and abuse of Aborigines at La Grange. Despite Piddington's allegations being only part of a series of damaging public revelations and allegations regarding the treatment and welfare of Aborigines in Western Australia they gave him no support.⁵ The ANRC's position was in part fuelled by the belief that Aborigines were on the road to extinction, and their desire to effect a balance between their research program—if the anthropological research 'is not done now...it will never be done'⁶—and maintaining sound relations with the government (particularly Neville). They recognised that Piddington's conduct had created a 'very uncomfortable atmosphere regarding the Council and anthropological research generally'.⁷ However, in dismissing Piddington's allegations, and ignoring public disquiet about the treatment and welfare of Aborigines, the ANRC was seemingly prepared to accept such conditions and treatment as, at least, inevitable and continue unchallenged. Like Neville they emphasised Piddington's personal behaviour. A mitigating factor in this assessment was Neville's reluctance to inform the ANRC of the accuracy of Piddington's allegations.

Neville also failed in his fiduciary duty to Aborigines. It is obvious, from a reading of the departmental files that the abuses Piddington detailed in his interview with *The World*, and in his earlier discussions with Neville, were substantiated by a departmental inquiry and police reports. Police who had interviewed Aboriginal workers who worked for the sandalwood cutters at La Grange stated that their evidence supported the allegations made by Piddington. Moreover they recommended the removal of John Spurling, the local protector. Neville ignored this recommendation and took no action to protect Aboriginal workers from these employers.

3. From interview given by Ralph Piddington to *The World*, January 14, 1932. National Library of Australia (NLA), MS 482, 859B. This relates to events at La Grange which are outlined by Neville. State Archives of Western Australia (hereafter SAWA), ACC993, 27/36. This is a restricted file. Copies of this file were provided on the condition that I 'respect the confidentiality of any personal information about Aboriginal people'. Chief Executive Officer, Aboriginal Affairs Department, to author, 21 December 1995. I would like to thank Cedric Wyatt, CEO, for permission to quote from this file.

4. This research was funded by the Rockefeller Foundation. See Peterson 1990; Gray 1997.

5. See Biskup 1973; Haebich 1988; Jacobs 1990.

6. Radcliffe-Brown to Gibson, 4 April 1930. 155/4/1/9, Elkin Papers, University of Sydney Archives (hereafter EP). This view was shared by Radcliffe-Brown's successors Raymond Firth and A.P. Elkin.

7. Sir George Julius to Raymond Firth, 21 October 1932. 155/4/1/10, EP; see also Gray 1993, pp. 23–28.

'Trying to do me personal injury'

Piddington was eager to establish a sound working relationship with Neville, and like Elkin and SD Porteus⁸ who had worked in the Northwest, was appreciative of the support Neville and his departmental officers provided him and his wife⁹ in the field. He visited Neville in March 1930 before he left for La Grange, and on his return six months later, when he discussed matters concerning the treatment and conditions of Aborigines at the Government Feeding Station, and the behaviour of the white employers of Aboriginal labour. In his discussions he stated that the local protector of Aborigines, John Spurling, was an unsuitable person and accused him, in association with other employers of Aboriginal labour, of defrauding the Aborigines' Department of rations. Neville, appreciative of Piddington's tact and discretion, promised to inquire into Piddington's allegations.

Before Piddington's second visit, Neville suggested that Piddington should not stay at La Grange because of the 'circumstances surrounding [your] last visit'.¹⁰ When Piddington sought clarification Neville assured him that there was no reflection on his personal conduct. Rather Neville was motivated by considerations of Piddington's 'personal comfort in view of the circumstances which have arisen since you were formerly at La Grange'.¹¹ Piddington had, perhaps inadvertently, caused Spurling to take offence; Spurling wrote that as Piddington and Gerhardt Laves, a linguist also sponsored by the ANRC, were leaving La Grange, only Laves, 'the gentleman', bid Spurling farewell and thanked Lucy¹² 'for having made bread for him and for washing his clothes'. Piddington did not have the 'decency to come and thank the woman for her services'; he also accused Piddington of engaging in local politics by supporting the local postmaster and his wife who were 'trying to do me personal injury' and causing 'trouble amongst the natives'.¹³ On the way to La Grange (in June 1931) Piddington visited Neville, who assured him that his allegations expressed on his previous visit had been investigated.¹⁴ This was the last occasion that Piddington spoke with Neville.

Piddington's earlier allegations had been investigated by Jack Woodland, manager of Moola Bulla Government Station. Piddington's allegations were not the first made against Spurling and the sandalwood cutters, Leonard Bilston,¹⁵ George Hatch,

8. S.D. Porteus who conducted psychological investigation among Aborigines in Northwest Western Australia guaranteed the government that any material they had filmed 'would [not] in any reflect upon the handling of the natives' in that state. Porteus to Neville, 20 November. SAWA, ACC 993, 133/28. Porteus was professor of Clinical Psychology in the University of Hawaii (see Gray 1994, *passim*).

9. Piddington and Piddington 1932, p. 342. It should be noted this was Piddington's first wife, (named Marjorie as was his second wife), who had taken anthropology at the University of Sydney.

10. Neville to Spurling, 10 April 1931. SAWA, ACC993, 133/30 (hereafter ACC993, 133/30).

11. Piddington to Neville, 24 May 1931; Neville to Piddington, 3 June 1931. ACC993, 133/30

12. Spurling was accused of abducting 'the Aboriginal woman Lucy'. SAWA, ACC993, 27/36 (hereafter ACC 993, 27/36). While at La Grange Elkin stayed with John Spurling, 'an elderly man', who was in charge of the Government Aboriginal feeding station at La Grange. The cooking was done 'for the most part, by a nice black gin, helped at times by a Malay-black half caste'[Lucy]. Elkin to Sally Elkin, 13 October 1928. 1/1/1/1, EP.

13. Spurling to Neville, 22 September 1930. ACC993, 133/30.

14. Memo, 20 June 1931. ACC993, 133/30.

Leslie MacLaughlin and Albert Smith. Sergeant Simpson of Broome police had reported 'along similar lines but [his] contained more serious allegations'. Inspector McGuiness, also of Broome, had recommended to his superiors in Perth that Spurling be 'relieved of his responsibilities'. McGuiness, in receipt of a later report by Simpson, who had interviewed Aboriginal workers who worked for Spurling and Leonard Bilston at La Grange stated that their evidence supported the allegations made by Piddington. However, this evidence could not be used in a prosecution against these men. Because they were by Aboriginal witnesses their statements had less weight in a court. These accounts support the allegations made by Piddington of the removal of government rations by Spurling and Bilston; incidents of fighting between Bilston (and others) and Aboriginal men: 'Bilston and Smith fight Ghandi because they want woman and Ghandi no want go with them'; sexual relations between the white men and Aboriginal women: 'Bilston sleep along Lucy'.¹⁶

Woodland reported to Neville that Spurling was 'on the spot and must know what is taking place'; if Spurling was unable to control the abuses by the sandalwood cutters, who were 'not fit to be in the vicinity of a native depot', he should be dismissed.¹⁷ Nevertheless, contrary to the evidence presented in the Broome police report, and that from Woodland, Neville declared to his Minister that Woodland's report 'more or less' exonerated Spurling. He took no action other than revoking Bilston's permit to employ Aboriginal labour, and he instructed Spurling not to have Bilston, Hatch, MacLaughlin or Smith within the confines of the government feeding station.¹⁸

'[Some] persons have not justified your confidence'

Piddington left Perth for Sydney just before Christmas Day, 1931. In early January the following year he was interviewed¹⁹ by the Sydney weekly, *The World*, during which he criticised the treatment and conditions of Aborigines in Western Australia. Piddington's allegations were not dissimilar to those he had previously made to Neville. He claimed that the abuses at La Grange were typical of the state affairs in Western Australia generally: 'we cannot be surprised if our attitude is recognised for what it is...absolute indifference to the sufferings of the native'.²⁰

Piddington's allegations of ill-treatment followed on those made by Mary Bennett, who 'considered herself an informed and experienced spokeswoman on Aborigines', and involved in the Women's Movement.²¹ Jacobs describes her as having the reformer's zeal to do something about Aborigines particularly the plight of Aboriginal women. Bennett had severely criticised the government and like Piddington made alle-

15. Leonard Bilston Jarvis was convicted in Broome on 27 March 1937 for 'sexual intercourse with a native, and 'employing natives without permits'. George Hatch was charged with 'sexual intercourse with a native women' but was not tried as he had left the area before the trial. Memo to Chief Secretary, 16 April 1937. ACC993, 27/36.

16. Neville, 'Resume'. ACC993, 27/36.

17. *ibid.*

18. This is extensively detailed in ACC993, 27/36. Neville stated that the association between 'Bilston & Co. and the natives at La Grange...has caused us a considerable amount of worry and trouble for some six years'. Memo to the Minister (Kitson), 2 July 1936. ACC993, 27/36.

19. For a full transcript of the interview see Gray 1994, pp. 22-224.

20. 'Aborigines on cattle stations are in slavery', interview given by Ralph Piddington to *The World*, January 14, 1932.

gations of slavery, sexual violation of women, starvation, dispossession, violence and appalling living and working conditions. In April 1932 Bennett had declared in a letter to the *ABM Review* that Piddington's 'courageous exposure of conditions in North-West Australia entitles him to gratitude from all who deplore the ill-treatment of the native Australian race'.²² The overall effect of this public criticism was not only to challenge Neville's authority and control of his departmental officers, but it also challenged the integrity of the protectors, and, of course, brought Western Australia's treatment of Aborigines to the notice of the world.²³

Neville, on being told about Piddington's now public allegations, believed they were contained in a report to the ANRC Committee for Anthropology, and he therefore sought a copy from Raymond Firth, acting chairman of the Committee and professor of anthropology in the University of Sydney.²⁴ Firth assured Neville that Piddington had made no report to the Committee.²⁵ Firth did, however, ask Piddington to supply Neville with a copy of the interview.²⁶ This he did not do, claiming not to have a copy, although Piddington explained to Neville that Neville's concerns, fuelled by rumour, were 'greatly exaggerated':

I presume that the reference is an interview which I gave to a representative of The World newspaper upon my return. There was no reference to your department except in regard to the retrenchment of Mr Mitchell which I deplored. I merely gave my views on the failure of our governments to provide adequate machinery to deal with the problem of the aborigines. I did not keep a copy of the interview.²⁷

This was not strictly correct as the newspaper report specifically referred to La Grange Bay, and Piddington's observations of 'slavery of natives, trafficking in lubras, and the murdering and flogging of [A]borigines by white men', and the claim that the West Australian government was 'indifferent to the abuses'.²⁸ Nevertheless Neville was content with Piddington's explanation until he received a copy of the July 1932 issue of the *Anti-Slavery Reporter and Aborigines' Friend* which contained extracts from Piddington's interview.²⁹

21. John Spurling wrote to Neville that Mrs Bennett 'left for Beagle Bay about the same time as Mr Piddington'. Spurling to Neville, 4 November 1931. ACC 993, 130/33. It is unclear whether they met.

22. M.M. Bennett, *ABM Review*, 15 April 1932.

23. Jacobs 1990, pp. 200-204.

24. Neville to Firth, 26 April 1932. ACC 993, 133/30.

25. Firth to Neville, 9 May 1932. ACC 993, 133/30.

26. Neville to Firth, 15 June 1932. ACC 993, 133/30. Neville added cryptically that he 'should really like to know what Mr Piddington had to say, in view of incidents which occurred while he was here'.

27. Piddington to Neville, 11 June 1932. ACC 993, 133/30.

28. However in a newspaper interview in July 1932 Piddington was more circumspect: "In Western Australia the problem of the aborigines is tacitly ignored and in spite of the efforts of the Aborigines Department (under the direction of Mr A.O. Neville) and various humanitarian organisations, the native is generally regarded as a dog, and is deemed unworthy to be regarded as a human being". *Sydney Morning Herald*, 7 July 1932.

29. Neville to Travers Buxton, Secretary, The Anti-Slavery and Aborigines Protection Society, 26 August 1932.

In a strongly worded letter Neville wrote to Firth: 'I cannot help thinking that Mr Piddington must have known perfectly well to what was alluded when he was asked to supply me with copies of any statement...It can only be assumed that he was not desirous of the Department perusing it'. The department, Neville continued, was willing to receive fair criticism but Piddington's statements were exaggerated, and did more harm to 'the cause of the aborigines than the illicit acts which occasionally occur. They reflected discredit on the government and its officers as well as on that true body of men the Northern pioneers who have, with few exceptions, always treated the aborigines well'. Nor could the events Piddington referred to 'have taken place without the full knowledge of the Department'. In fact Neville claimed that at no time were the

interests of the natives better conserved than at present, any episode of an untoward nature being promptly reported to the Department which decides the action taken. To say that 'the aborigines and half-castes have neither human rights nor protection' is sheer nonsense, since there are scattered throughout the length and breadth of the State no less than a hundred persons who are authorised to afford protection, and are continually in touch with the Department personally in that connection.³⁰

Piddington's 'extraordinary abuse of the hospitality...extended' by Neville put all future research in the state in jeopardy. Neville expressed his concern: 'nothing has happened since the Committee [for Anthropology] was first appointed likely to act so detrimentally to that work here as the publication of his unsupported statements'. This was somewhat disingenuous of Neville. He knew, as the files reveal, that Piddington was mostly repeating what he had previously told Neville in June 1930, and had observed on his return to La Grange, and that the action by the department to cease these abuses was inadequate. Neville was therefore well apprised of the position. Neville used it as an opportunity to further restrict the possibility of outside criticism by insisting that future researchers were to submit any criticism first to his department which would afford Neville the opportunity of refuting or investigating any allegations. Piddington, Neville told Firth, would not be welcomed.³¹

Firth hoped for a speedy resolution. He praised Neville for the 'facilities which you have extended to our field workers in the past...services which have been greatly appreciated by us here'.³² Aware of the seriousness of the complaint by Neville for the continuance of research in Western Australia,³³ Firth wrote to Piddington asking him for a reply to Neville's letter. Could Piddington produce 'evidence for your general statements, and did you at any time inform Mr Neville or other officers of such evidence before reporting in the Press?'; was there any explanation 'you might be prepared to make which would be acceptable' to Neville. If Piddington could not substantiate the

³⁰. Neville to Firth, 26 August 1932. ACC 993, 133/30.

³¹. *ibid.*

³². Firth to Neville, 7 September 1932. ACC 993, 133/30.

³³. Firth was cognisant of Neville's sensitivity regarding criticism of the treatment of Aborigines in Western Australia and had noted that Neville took criticism of the treatment and conditions of Aborigines in Western Australia as reflecting on the competence of the department. He added that in any event such criticism was 'quite likely to be ignored'. Firth, 'Notes on Anthropological Field work near Broome', 3 May 1932. 161/4/1/85, EP. Firth and Piddington discussed these matters. See for example Piddington to Firth, 11 September 1932. 159/4/1/61 EP. See also Firth 1998.

charges with whatever material he had at his disposal he had to withdraw them. Firth emphasised that other anthropologists would be asked to give assurances that they 'will not make statements reflecting against the administration without first giving the administration an opportunity of refuting or investigating these charges'. Neville wanted the ANRC to take 'action in the matter'.³⁴ Piddington, who departed for London at the beginning of September, assured Firth that Neville was misinformed.³⁵

The Executive Committee of the ANRC viewed with 'concern the possible results of [Piddington's] action which will undoubtedly create a very unfavourable atmosphere regarding this Council and anthropological research generally'. They too demanded an explanation from Piddington. The Executive was in agreement with Neville that Piddington should first have given Neville the opportunity of either refuting or investigating his statements.³⁶ Alexander Gibson, honorary secretary of the ANRC, assured Neville that the Executive Committee was in 'entire agreement' with him, and that Piddington's action constituted a 'grave abuse of the hospitality [you] extended to him'. Gibson declared that 'should any further research work be contemplated in Western Australia, every effort will be made to prevent a recurrence of such incidents'.³⁷ That may well have been the end of the matter.

Quite unexpectedly Neville received a letter from Arthur (Dick) Povah³⁸ who had recently completed 'a most exhaustive and extensive tour of the Kimberleys and the Northern Territory' where the 'sole topic of introduction' were the letters 'recently printed in the Eastern States and the Perth press'.³⁹ He observed that some of the 'persons in whom your department has given open access to the natives... have not justified your confidence', particularly Withington⁴⁰ and Piddington. Povah alleged that Piddington had 'intoxicating drink' in the presence of Aborigines and that his presence was 'detrimental' to Aborigines at La Grange. Povah advised Neville to 'study up this particular case'.⁴¹

Any doubts Neville may have had about Spurling were now forgotten; Povah's letter 'shed fresh light' on Piddington's behaviour and presented an aspect of the matter 'entirely new' to Neville. Piddington had, he wrote to Povah, been a 'source of considerable worry to us while he was in the North and did his best to upset the relations between the Department and one of its officers [Spurling], an officer who in my opinion is carrying out his duties effectively'.⁴²

34. Firth to Piddington, 8 September 1932. 159/4/1/61, EP.

35. Piddington to Firth, 11 September 1932. 159/4/1/61, EP.

36. Julius to Firth. 21 October, 1932. 155/4/1/10, EP.

37. Gibson to Neville, 21 October 1932. NLA, MS 482, 803 (e).

38. He described himself as a 'Kimberleyite, whose children are Kimberleyites and whose every penny for many years has been invested and distributed in the Kimberleys'. Povah stood for the 1932 state election as Independent Country Party. SAWA, ACC993, 313/32 (hereafter ACC993, 313/32).

39. Povah referred specifically to those letters written by Mary Bennett, 'Mr Gallagher, the Rev Schenk, and an interview with Mrs Drysdale'. See also Jacobs 1990, pp. 200-204.

40. Withington was a medical doctor who accompanied Porteus. SAWA, ACC993, 133/28.

41. Povah to Neville, 20 September 1932. ACC993, 313/32.

42. Neville to Povah, 3 October 1932. ACC993, 313/32.

Armed with Povah's allegations he set to work to discredit Piddington. He sought information from the Commissioner of Police adding that Piddington had published a 'wholly unwarranted attack...upon the Departments, including yours'.⁴³ Povah, encouraged by Neville's reply, provided explicit questions for Neville to investigate:

I suggest you call for a report from Sergeant Simpson...Ask for a statement re (1) sobriety. (2) The reason Piddington was summoned to the Police Station Broome...in reference to serious complaints about taking household natives away from their employment...(3) Whether his influence was beneficial or detrimental to the natives. A report on Piddington's general conduct (1) and sobriety, from Constable D. Harris...A Report from Constable Harper...re sobriety and Drunkenness while driving. and in connection with (2) as mentioned in Simpson's report...A report from Both Cont. Sheridan and Harper...as to whether they reported Piddington over a Red Flag incident.⁴⁴

However the police report Neville asked for was strong on hearsay but lacked specificity. Piddington 'was said to be addicted to drink and always carried a supply...with him'; police had seen Piddington under the influence of alcohol but none had seen him drive 'whilst in this condition nor whilst in the company of natives'. He was said to have 'commented adversely upon the treatment of Aborigines' in the Fitzroy District although he had not visited there; neither of the police officers would comment on Piddington's influence on Aborigines. Removing Aborigines without proper authority had been noted and Piddington, who was unaware he had transgressed the law, ceased the practice. With regard to 'taking away the female native 'Topsy', in the employ of Mr Povah, Piddington had been cautioned'. Finally Piddington's attendance 'at a convivial evening' when the 'Red Flag' and communist songs were sung⁴⁵ had been reported to the appropriate department in Perth.⁴⁶ Despite these statements Neville encouraged the police commissioner to push the investigation along as Piddington continued to 'traduce' the state.⁴⁷ Casting round for further evidence to discredit Piddington Neville sought Spurling's opinion with regard to Piddington's sobriety, removal of Aborigines without proper authority or 'any other such incident of like nature'.⁴⁸ Spurling could add nothing new although he did offer the opinion that Piddington's conduct 'was hardly in keeping with the position he had', and added that Laves had formed the 'opinion that Piddington was mad'.⁴⁹

Despite the paucity of evidence Neville hinted in a letter to Firth that he had been investigating 'certain allegations' against Piddington, and he had 'unfortunately established certain facts which possibly the Committee ought to be aware of'. They were of such a 'damaging nature' to Piddington's reputation he would not supply the information if Piddington was no longer working under the auspices of the ANRC.⁵⁰ Firth had

43. Neville to Commissioner of Police, 4 October 1932. ACC993, 133/30.

44. Povah to Neville, 20 October 1932. ACC993, 313/32.

45. K.A. Donaldson, memo, 25 October 1932. ACC993, 133/30. Raymond Firth writes that Piddington was 'what was called rather 'wild' at times. The 'Red Flag'/ Internationale incident was such a wild prank. He and some friends got a bot (sic) drunk and wanted to annoy the good bourgeoisie: it was comic, not serious. But it marred the seriousness of his allegations'. Letter to the author, 20 February 1993.

46. Memo, Harper 5 November 1932; Memo, Sheridan, 13 November 1932. ACC993, 133/30.

47. Neville, memo, 17 November 1932. ACC993, 133/30.

48. Neville to Spurling, 6 December 1932. ACC993, 133/30.

resigned to take up a position at the London School of Economics. Elkin, who had replaced him, told Neville he was sorry to find that Piddington

did not observe those principles of courtesy which would be expected of him, especially where your Department and yourself are concerned, for you have been wonderfully kind and helpful to our workers, not least to myself. The Executive has realised all along the tremendous help you and the Minister afforded me, both financially (through transport and hospitality) and scientifically (through allowing me to work unhampered on your stations).

He added that it was unfortunate that Piddington's reputation was 'also at stake'. Nevertheless, further action would be left to the Executive Committee of the ANRC.⁵¹

Neville was no doubt heartened by Elkin's sentiments. He found further support from William Morley, secretary of the Association for the Protection of Native Races (APNR). Morley wrote that he had seen Piddington's article, but, that the 'statements conveyed no authentic information of facts'; he had sought substantiated evidence from Piddington which he failed to supply.⁵² This was a view also expressed in the editorial of the *ABM Review*.⁵³ By April 1933 the Executive Committee of the ANRC, who thought Piddington had had 'ample time' to provide an explanation, concluded that as he was 'unable to supply any satisfactory explanation...his statements were without justification'. They advised Neville of this adding that they 'greatly deplored' the actions of Piddington, and stated Neville could make 'such use as you may think desirable of this letter'.⁵⁴

It seems Neville was content, finally, to leave the matter there. He advised his Minister that it did 'not seem necessary' to take any further steps in the matter.⁵⁵ Piddington's allegations had not received support from the ANRC nor the humanitarian bodies such as the APNR or the Australian Board of Missions. Quite the contrary. They were in general agreement in deploring Piddington's failure to substantiate his allegations of mistreatment of Aborigines. Neville was able to set out the conditions for future anthropological researchers in Western Australia, which had as its keystone that any complaints about his departmental officers and/or the treatment of Aborigines be

49. Spurling to Neville, 16 December 1932. ACC993, 133/30. Spurling remembered Piddington's behaviour as 'exempary (sic) on his first occasion, here untill (sic) falling out with Mr Gerhardt Laves' (*ibid*). Laves wrote to Radcliffe-Brown that 'apart from a wearisome sora with Ralph over not too significant issues' (Laves to Radcliffe-Brown, 8 August 1930. 159/4/1/53, EP). Piddington had written earlier that 'Gerhardt, who appears to be staying here indefinitely, is the only feature of our field work which can definitely be described as a hardship, since the flies and mosquitoes have not bothered us as we expected they would and the climate is, at present, perfect' (Piddington to Radcliffe-Brown, 16 July 1930. 159/4/1/61, EP). These are the only comments I have located which make reference to tensions between Laves and Piddington.

50. Neville to Firth, 14 December 1932. ACC 993, 133/30.

51. Elkin to Neville, 26 January 1933. ACC 993, 133/30. For a discussion about the relationship between Elkin and Neville see Gray 1996; 1997.

52. W Morley to Neville, nd, (?May 1933). ACC 993, 133/30.

53. The Australian Board of Missions publication. It stated that 'It is [Piddington's] manifest duty to...substantiate these allegations'. *ABM Review*, August 1933. p. 77.

54. Gibson to Neville, 7 April 1933. NLA, MS 482, 804 (c).

55. Memo, 20 July 1933. ACC 993, 133/30.

directed to Neville, or to the ANRC, who would instruct its researchers to make complaints or criticisms through them. Moreover, he was assured that Piddington would not return to Western Australia. The matter seemed finished—'apparently nothing more can be done in regard to the entire business now'—although he did, at the request of Gibson, 'make known...the information' concerning Piddington's behaviour which he had hinted at in an earlier letter to Firth.⁵⁶ This information was later formalised by the ANRC into a series of 'charges' against Piddington.

The ANRC had uncritically accepted Neville's explanation, and his unsubstantiated allegations against Piddington. The ANRC Committee for Anthropology, and its Executive Committee, did not investigate Piddington's allegations, rather they voiced their criticism of Piddington and expressed their concern that Piddington's actions made it difficult for continued anthropological research in Western Australia. It was Piddington's personal behaviour that was subjected to scrutiny and found wanting. Added to this was the lack of desire by the ANRC to put the research program at risk by offending Neville and the West Australian government.⁵⁷ The appalling conditions and treatment of Aborigines were expendable in the pursuit of fast disappearing scientific data.⁵⁸

'I will be entirely frank'

Piddington's reply, which was not received by the ANRC until late August 1933, was a spirited and detailed defence of his allegations. He had delayed attending to Firth's letter of 8 September as he knew Firth was coming to London. Piddington wanted to discuss matters with Firth before replying to the ANRC.⁵⁹ He assured the ANRC that he would 'present the facts in chronological order and will be entirely frank on my attitude'. He stated that he had observed 'certain abuses'. Camped at the Government Feeding Station were several men who worked at a sandalwood camp some miles inland. The relations between these men and the Aborigines was 'extremely unsatisfactory'. He informed Ernest Mitchell,⁶⁰ then Chief Inspector of Aborigines (Broome), that Aboriginal women had been sexually violated and Aboriginal men and women were beaten; that quarrels had arisen between the white men and the Aboriginal husbands of these women, on one occasion leading to a fight in the presence of Spurling, who took

⁵⁶. Neville to Gibson, 8 August 1933; Neville to Firth, 14 December 1932. ACC 993, 133/30.

⁵⁷. Firth commented that it is 'a bit anachronistic in decrying the 'supineness' of anthropologists sixty years ago. It is easy to say this now, but I wonder what you would have done in 1932/3 if you had been responsible for a research programme?' Firth to author, 20 February 1993.

⁵⁸. Piddington, like other scientists at the time, expressed the view that 'everything that could be known about them [Aborigines] should be discovered immediately, as the natives were rapidly dying out'. From the *West Australian*, 11 June 1931.

⁵⁹. See Gray 1994, pp. 228–30 for the full text.

⁶⁰. 'Mr Mitchell combines an extensive knowledge of the mentality of the aborigines, based upon years of observation, with a keen appreciation (too rare amongst white men) of their estimable qualities', Piddington and Piddington 1932, p. 342. Mitchell was retrenched as a part of the Government policy of reduction of expenditure. Ernest Gribble wrote that at the Royal Commission into the Forrest River Massacre that 'Inspector Mitchell stated to myself, JC Thomson and Dr Adams individually that if there was anything unsavoury in the story of Hays death he would keep it out of the court for the sake of the fair name of his native state'. ER Gribble, 'Sidelights on the Royal Commission of 1927', ML MSS 4503, 15/7. This suggests that Mitchell was not a reliable witness.

no action in the matter; that liquor had been given to the Aborigines by these men; that Government rations, destined for the consumption of old and sick Aborigines at the Feeding station, were being used to support able-bodied Aboriginal employees at the sandalwood camp, as well as the white men working there. He pointed out that these abuses took place with the 'full knowledge' of Spurling, who was 'obviously incapable' of doing anything to stop them, and he 'therefore suggested' that Spurling was an 'entirely unsuitable person to hold the position which he did'. He left the matter with Mitchell who placed it before Neville. On his return to Perth he discussed the matter with Neville, who promised to look into it. Eight months later, Neville informed him that he had sent an investigator to La Grange who had reported that Piddington's allegations were greatly exaggerated. Piddington had 'not the slightest doubt that this report was prompted by the investigator's desire not to find any facts which might reflect upon the administration of the Aborigines Department'.⁶¹ Neville told him that 'he saw no need to take any action beyond (1) a reproof to Mr Spurling in which he insisted that the white men should no longer camp within the grounds of the Feeding Station and (2) the cancellation of the white men's permits to employ aborigines'.⁶²

Upon his return to La Grange Bay, in June 1931, Piddington found the white men camped not at the Feeding Station but at the Government Cattle Dip, a mile or so away. They had been employing natives in defiance of Neville's edict, the sole effect of which was thus to exonerate them from the payment of the fee for a permit to employ Aborigines. He did not collect 'concrete evidence' at La Grange Bay, since he was primarily interested in the 'purely scientific' work he was carrying out for the ANRC. His assertion that the abuses at La Grange Bay were typical of the state of affairs in Western Australia was an assessment 'largely based upon information supplied' by Mitchell. He was adamant that he had supplied Neville 'with information as to my public statements'. Neville had ignored 'the fact' that Piddington drew the Department's attention to the 'serious abuses' at La Grange Bay which were 'known to both my wife and myself as a result of several months residence there', and he considered the action taken by the Department was quite inadequate to the situation, which was 'proved by the fact that the state of affairs...had not materially altered when I returned'. He emphasised that his 'attack has throughout been upon the general attitude of white people towards aborigines and not upon the Aborigines' Department in Western Australia'. Finally, he expressed regret that members of the Council should have been troubled with this matter, although his action 'throughout [had] been justified by the need for reducing as far as possible, those abuses in connection with the treatment of aborigines which are beginning to be regarded in other countries as a national disgrace to the Commonwealth'.⁶³ Piddington's detailed and specific explanation was not accepted by the ANRC. They did not alter the view.

61. Piddington to Committee for Anthropological Research (ANRC), 17 July 1933. 159/4/1/61. EP.

62. Neville, 'Memo of conversation with Piddington', 20 June 1931. ACC 993, 133/30. See also 'Resume' in WASA, ACC 993, 27/36.

63. Piddington to Committee for Anthropological Research (ANRC), 17 July 1933. 159/4/1/61. EP. The full text can be found in Gray 1994, pp. 228-230.

Travers Buxton, honorary secretary of the London based Anti-Slavery and Aborigines' Protection Society, wrote to Neville that he had read Piddington's explanation to the ANRC and noted that Piddington had not withdrawn or modified his allegations.⁶⁴ Neville was annoyed he had not been informed and wrote to the chairman of the ANRC Committee for Anthropology: 'I feel sure you will realise how important it is that any matter prepared by Mr Piddington for publication should be reviewed by those most concerned before it is issued to the public'.⁶⁵ Sir Hal Colebatch, Agent-General for Western Australia and a past Minister in charge of the Aborigines' Department, took particular offence to Piddington's statement that the West Australian government was 'indifferent to abuses of natives'; a statement that was 'grossly untrue' and 'grossly offensive to the Government'.⁶⁶ Neville was again assured by the ANRC that Piddington's conduct had brought discredit upon the ANRC, himself and 'scientists as a whole', and that they would not again employ Piddington.⁶⁷ Elkin wrote a personal note to Neville saying he was 'very sorry that the unpleasant incident had occurred'.⁶⁸

At the end of August 1933, in response to his Minister's increasing concerns about public criticism of the treatment of Aborigines in Western Australia, Neville provided him with a resume of Piddington's allegations, Neville's evidence of Piddington's behaviour, and the actions Neville had taken. He assured the Minister that Piddington's allegations had been thoroughly investigated and Spurling had been 'completely exonerated of dishonest practices' and acts of immorality as Woodland had considered 'him past that sort of thing on account of his age'. Neville had contacted Ernest Mitchell. He did not support Piddington's allegations, rather, Mitchell inferred that Piddington had come under the influence of the postmaster's wife, who had used the opportunity to 'further her own extreme views'.⁶⁹ Piddington's statements were based on erroneous information 'which he was gullible enough to accept as true' and he had placed an 'utterly wrong construction on many incidents of every-day occurrence in the North'. Piddington was 'young and inexperienced [and] ignorant of native matters, or how people live in the back country'. Neville accused Piddington of trying to 'blacken the name' of Western Australia using material Neville had 'officially' told him was false.⁷⁰

Nevertheless the constant public criticism of the department was having an effect. There were reports and correspondence in the *West Australian* that Aborigines were in slavery, accusations of sexual abuse of Aboriginal women, starvation, ill-treatment and physical violence.⁷¹ In September 1933 the West Australian Parliament voted for a Royal Commission⁷² into allegations concerning the treatment of Aborigines generally, 'particularly in regard to statements appearing in the press recently'.⁷³ Neville assured

64. Buxton to Neville, 12 July 1933. ACC 993, 133/30.

65. Neville to Elkin, 14 August 1933. ACC 993, 133/30.

66. Colebatch to Piddington, 26 July 1933. ACC 993, 133/30.

67. Gibson to Neville, 31 August 1933. ACC 993, 133/30.

68. Elkin to Neville, 6 September 1933. ACC 993, 133/30.

69. This view is not supported by Mitchell's evidence before the Royal Commission, see Jacobs 1991, pp. 233-34.

70. Minute, 25 August 1933. ACC 993, 133/30.

71. Jacobs 1991, pp. 200-212; Reynolds 1998.

72. See Jacobs 1991, pp. 213-242.

73. Neville to Buxton, 18 September 1933. ACC 993, 133/30.

both Travers Buxton and Elkin, the Royal Commission was not directed at the department. Neville was confident that Piddington 'shall be sorry' once his allegations were subjected to examination by the Royal Commissioner.⁷⁴

Although not in direct response to the Western Australian Royal Commission Neville's allegations against Piddington were taken up, again, by the ANRC. The reports had 'caused grave concern' to the Executive Committee who had notified the Rockefeller Foundation that had they been in possession of Neville's report they would not have supported Piddington's application for a Rockefeller funded fellowship to London, and, until they received a satisfactory explanation they would not make available any funds for his return to Australia.⁷⁵ They regretted this course of action, but nonetheless enjoined Piddington to agree with their decision: 'you will of course realize that the fellows and research workers sent out to distant regions under its aegis must maintain a high standard of conduct otherwise great discredit is likely to reflect on the Council and indirectly on other scientific workers'. Having made their judgment they invited him to make comment.⁷⁶

The reason for this belated attack on Piddington is unclear but it may be inferred that with the appointment of Elkin as professor of anthropology at the end of December 1933 the continuance of the department of anthropology was no longer under threat; therefore the problem of placing fieldworkers in Western Australia, and Piddington's likely return to Australia, caused both Elkin and Gibson, who had previously demonstrated that they disapproved of Piddington's behaviour, to take some decisive action. It would seem also that the ANRC did not want to be caught out should the Royal Commission make an adverse finding about Piddington (and by implication the ANRC).

The Rockefeller Foundation did not support the ANRC's decision nor agree with their judgment about Piddington; they doubted 'the objectivity of those who would prefer charges against [Piddington], since they would appear to be officials who might have been irked' by his criticisms.⁷⁷ They expressed no wish to discontinue Piddington's fellowship. This did not alter the resolve of the Executive Committee of ANRC who, at Elkin's insistence, did not change its previous decision concerning Piddington's further employment.⁷⁸

'In view of the obvious animus'

Piddington expressed surprise that he had not been given the opportunity of replying to the charges concerning his conduct. Neville accused Piddington of misconduct, drunkenness, singing the 'Internationale', waving the Red Flag, abducting an Aboriginal woman, and removing Aboriginal men from a government reserve without permission. Piddington was told of Neville's charges by Stacy May of the Rockefeller Foundation;⁷⁹ he had not received any acknowledgment from the ANRC regarding his

74. Neville to Elkin, 19 September 1933. ACC 993, 133/30.

75. Gibson to Edmund Day (Rockefeller Foundation), 23 December 1933. 155/4/1/2, EP.

76. Gibson to Piddington, 23 December 1933. NLA, MS 482, 859A.

77. May to Gibson, 31 January 1934. 155/4/1/2. EP (copies were sent to Piddington and Copland). See Gray 1994, and Mulvaney 1990, for further discussion.

78. Elkin to Julius, 28 February 1934. 155/4/1/5; Gibson to Elkin, 21 March 1934, 156/4/1/12, EP.

response of the previous year. He was anxious he would not be funded by the ANRC on his return to Australia, and sought reassurance that this was not so.⁸⁰ On the same day he wrote to Neville, seeking his support:

I understand that it has been suggested to the ANRC, by whom I do not know, that while in Western Australia I sought out natives in order to obtain anthropological information without obtaining permission from the constituted authorities. ...As the administration of native affairs in Western Australia is under your direction you will at once see the dual absurdity of such a charge. In the first place the obtaining of anthropological information from natives is not an offence under the Aborigines Act of Western Australia. In the second place, as you know, I interviewed you prior to both of my expeditions to the north-west, and you, as the 'constituted authority' were fully aware that I was carrying out anthropological research, nor did you at the time raise any objection to my so doing beyond suggesting (during our interview of June 1931) that for my own sake I should not return to a district where I had incurred a considerable amount of unpopularity by drawing attention to the maltreatment of natives.⁸¹

Neville replied that he was unable to recollect the detail nor was he able to consult the file as it was before the Royal Commission; nor did he declare his central role in the charges made against Piddington. He did, however, point out that Piddington's authority applied only to native reserves, and disingenuously added 'whether any action of yours outside such reserves caused the suggestion to be made I am not in a position to say'.⁸² Neville was unable to agree with Piddington's version of events as this would require him to acknowledge that Piddington had not only informed him but that much of Piddington's allegations had been substantiated by both Woodland and independent police reports.

Piddington replied to each charge, and hoped that 'in view of the obvious animus with which they are preferred', the ANRC would reconsider its position. He did not withdraw the substance of his statements although he gave an undertaking, should the Council grant him 'further facilities for study', to 'observe all formalities and to establish as harmonious a relationship as possible with Government officials'. In the event of 'any abuses coming to my notice, to report them directly to the Council, and to the Council only, leaving it entirely in their hands to do what they think fit in the matter'. He was contrite and apologised for any embarrassment he may have caused the Council.⁸³ Neville, who was offered the opportunity to respond, was equally unrepentant: 'the evidence in my opinion is so definite in regard to his intemperate habits that his attempts to belittle the matter do not impress me'. He emphasised that Piddington did

79. May to Piddington, 30 April 1934. ANL MS 482, 859A.

80. Piddington to Gibson, 13 April 1934. NLA, MS 482, 859A.

81. Piddington to Neville, 13 April 1934. NLA, MS 482, 859A.

82. Neville to Piddington, 23 May 1934. ACC 993, 133/30. This correspondence between Piddington and Neville was not presented to the Royal Commissioner. Neville addressed the Royal Commission in March. He had granted permission to Piddington to camp at La Grange: 'I hereby accord you [Piddington and his wife] such permission...to camp at La Grange for a period of six months...[I]f you should happen to visit any other centres under the control of the Department it will be necessary for you to notify me'. Neville to Piddington, 8 May 1930. ACC 993, 133/30.

83. Piddington to Gibson, 24 May 1934. 156/4/1/61. EP See Gray 1994, pp. 235-37 for the full text.

not deny the assertions of misbehaviour but 'merely [denied] having conducted himself in a manner likely to bring discredit on the ANRC'.⁸⁴ Piddington's original allegations of mistreatment of Aborigines was lost in the welter of allegations about his erratic behaviour and intemperate habits.

Gibson, keen to explain the ANRC's case against Piddington to the Rockefeller Foundation, pointed out that Elkin had spent the 'greater part of two years in North-west and Central Australia, among...the same people [Aborigines] and the same type of [government] people as those with whom so much friction' had occurred in the case of Piddington. Laves conducted his research in the 'same territory and they worked together part of the time'; there was 'no hint of any trouble whatsoever with him', whereas Piddington's actions and general behaviour caused a 'great deal of dissatisfaction, even if not actual resentment'.⁸⁵ The ANRC therefore felt that it was 'not possible to ignore the representations of an official of Mr Neville's standing...whose [written] report...is the base of this correspondence'.⁸⁶

By uncritically accepting Neville's allegations against Piddington the ANRC had placed itself in a difficult situation. Douglas Copland, fellowship adviser to the Rockefeller Foundation for the Social Sciences in Australia and New Zealand, brought some perspective to the matter. He wrote to the Rockefeller Foundation that after discussion with George Julius, president of the ANRC, and Alexander Gibson, three points arose with regard to Piddington: firstly, his indiscretion in giving an interview to a newspaper concerning the treatment of Aborigines in Western Australia during his research work; secondly, the report that he was observed drunk on a number of occasions; and finally, the report that he was observed singing the 'Red Flag' and might thus be a communist. He concluded there was nothing in the third matter to concern the ANRC,⁸⁷ and although 'I can say quite frankly that there are some grounds for thinking that Piddington did enjoy liquor from time to time during his field work' this was not sufficient grounds alone to determine the matter. The first problem was, however, 'rather different'. The ANRC 'would find itself embarrassed' sponsoring field work by Piddington in Western Australia, where the authorities would be 'definitely unwilling at the moment to extend to him the facilities' they usually extend to research fellows in anthropology.⁸⁸

Copland was concerned that the Rockefeller Foundation could see the action against Piddington as being personal and not based on academic considerations.⁸⁹ Such a view finds support in Gibson's comment that Elkin was 'not very favourable to including Piddington again in the team of anthropological workers'.⁹⁰ Copland expressed his concerns to Gibson adding he had an 'uneasy feeling that we may be letting the Rockefeller Foundation down if we decide at this stage that Piddington cannot

⁸⁴ Neville to Gibson, 15 September 1934. NLA, MS482, 859A.

⁸⁵ Neville states in his memo to his Minister regarding Piddington's allegations that in Woodland's report there was a letter from Laves 'offering to support Spurling in the event of trouble following Piddington's charges'. Memo, 25 August 1933. ACC 993, 133/30.

⁸⁶ Gibson to May, 4 July 1934. NLA, MS 482, 859A.

⁸⁷ Cf Gray 1993, pp. 23-28

⁸⁸ Copland to Van Sickle, 27 June 1934. 156/4/1/12, EP.

⁸⁹ Copland to Gibson, 3 August 1934, 156/4/1/12, EP.

⁹⁰ Gibson to Elkin, 6 September 1934. 156/4/1/12, EP

be sponsored as a field worker. The accounts of his research abroad are uniformly good, and he is clearly an able student'. He suggested that on Piddington's return to Australia further discussion concerning his academic future would need to take place.⁹¹ A view also taken by the Rockefeller Foundation.⁹²

It was Elkin who offered a way of easing the discomfiture Piddington was causing. It was both expedient and intellectually authoritarian.⁹³ He understood Copland's point of view, and that of the Rockefeller Foundation. He suggested that for the sake of the Foundation the ANRC should grant Piddington a fellowship when he returned. Before they took that course of action, however, there were several considerations. Firstly, the availability of funding. He enclosed a budget of expenses 'to which the ANRC was committed for the next twelve months' adding that 'you will notice that this barely leaves enough to grant a Fellowship to Piddington'. Secondly, sending Piddington to Western Australia would be 'hardly possible' as they had to 'consider Mr Neville who has helped us considerably with research work in Western Australia'. Finally, there was the problem of 'proper' anthropological research. Elkin had had no 'definite report' of his work in London 'merely a statement that [Piddington's] interest has been transferred to an aspect of Psychology'.⁹⁴ Elkin would thus not be able to personally recommend that Piddington should be sent out 'to do Psychology, for I do not think that the expenses involved in Professor Porteus' expedition, and Piddington's second expedition, were justified'. Elkin concluded, that should Piddington be 'discreet [and] work solidly at anthropology', it might be wise for the Council to give him work in Northern Australia.⁹⁵ Fortunately for the ANRC Piddington found work at the London School of Economics 'devoting himself to the study of African problems and languages in preparation for his field research fellowship'.⁹⁶ Piddington was not included again in the team of anthropological workers. He never again worked in an Australian academic institution.

'Mollifying government sensitivities'

Elkin had previously shown himself to be tactful and discreet in his dealings with Neville and other government agents.⁹⁷ He always stressed to the relevant government authority that a research worker would cause no trouble to either whites or Aborigines. Phyllis Kaberry,⁹⁸ the first anthropological researcher sent to Western Australia after

91. Copland to Gibson, 27 June 1934. 156/4/1/12, EP

92. May to Gibson, 3 August 1934. 156/4/1/12, EP.

93. Mulvaney 1993, p. 124.

94. This was not so; he had received several reports of Piddington's work from Raymond Firth, such as that in January 1934: 'As for Piddington's work here is concerned, I learn from Seligman that he has submitted some quite good articles to him, and I think he has learned quite a lot from Malinowski and at the other seminars here. He should do much better work than before, and I hope that you will find room for him'. (Firth to Elkin, 28 January 1934. 159/4/1/61 EP).

95. Elkin to Gibson, 18 September 1934. 156/4/1/12, EP. Cf 'I know that the Executive will hesitate before changing its previous decisions with regard to any further employment of Piddington. In any case, there may not be sufficient money to consider his application. I certainly think that Mr Eggan should be obtained to do work in Australia, and should be given first preference'. Elkin to Julius, 28 February 1934. 155/4/1/5, EP.

96. Gibson to Copland, 10 December 1934. NLA, MS 482, 804 (a).

Piddington, was described by Elkin as a 'quiet, sensible person...who will not, I am sure, cause you any problems such as were unfortunately caused by a previous worker'.⁹⁹ Firth thought Elkin 'went too far in mollifying government sensitivities'.¹⁰⁰ Thus Elkin cast anthropology at the service of government rather than enabling anthropology to critique government policy and practice.¹⁰¹ This ensured critiques of Neville's administration, cases of mistreatment, and poor conditions of Aborigines would not be placed in the public domain. The ANRC revealed itself to be a timid academic institution acting in sympathetic collaboration with a government agency. Both Elkin and the ANRC were guided by expediency.¹⁰²

The Royal Commissioner exonerated Neville and the department. Neville, by carefully culling the files presented to the Moseley Royal Commission, ensured that any damaging information in them was under his control. Neville was unwittingly assisted by the Royal Commissioner who acknowledged in his report that he had read little of the files, rather relying on his own observations for the conclusions he made. Piddington's file, as it now exists, emphasises Piddington's erratic behaviour and intemperate habits as the problem, and the accusation that he acted out of malice against Neville and the West Australian government; a view presented by Neville to his Minister, W.H. Kitson, the ANRC and the Royal Commissioner. It was a view they accepted.

The evidence of Aborigines was not called for. The Royal Commissioner was unable to accept evidence from Aborigines although he was to examine the treatment of Aborigines, and the serious allegations made about the 'maladministration of matters affecting Aborigines'.¹⁰³ He found nothing adverse at La Grange Bay. Despite the police being satisfied that many of the abuses outlined by Piddington had occurred there was no possibility, as the law stood, of a successful prosecution using only evidence from Aborigines.

Despite some changes which arose from the Royal Commission it was obvious on Spurling's retirement in January 1936 that little had changed at La Grange Bay. The new protector, George Hodges, discovered that one of Spurling's last acts was to grant a general permit to George Hatch who was in partnership with Bilston. It was evident, stated

97. Elkin's conduct in the field between 1927 and 1928 had established a type of researcher acceptable to Neville and the West Australian government. He showed himself to be approving of Western Australian government policy and practice, to be tactful and discreet and he had not publicly (or privately) challenge the existing order, involving the treatment and conditions of Aborigines. Elkin also wrote a confidential report for the ABM on E.R. Gribble, superintendent of the ABM Forrest River Mission. He recommended the removal of Gribble. This was accepted by the ABM board. The report helped establish Elkin as the church authority on Aborigines and mission work. Gray 1996; 1997.

98. 'In 1934 Miss Kaberry spent a little over six months in North West Australia, mainly in the Forrest River—Wyndham District, studying the social organisation, working mostly through the women. The purpose of this was to supplement the work that I had done there through the men in 1928'. Elkin, Annual Report of Committee on Anthropological Research, 1935. 161/4/1/81, EP. She returned in 1935–36.

99. Elkin to Neville, 18 April 1934. SAWA, ACC653, 120/25.

100. Letter to author, 20 February 1993.

101. Cowlshaw 1990; Gray 1994; 1997.

102. This is elaborated in Gray 1998.

103. Jacobs 1991, p. 214.

Hodges, that Bilston had been employing Aborigines 'under the lap' which was known to Spurling who had 'been working hand in glove [with Bilston] for years'.¹⁰⁴ It is clear from this that Neville was unable to control the behaviour and action of Spurling. Neville was no doubt poorly served by Spurling but he had, nevertheless, sufficient independent evidence that Piddington's allegations regarding Spurling had substance.

There is no doubt that the allegations of mistreatment caused considerable embarrassment to Neville and the Western Australian government both nationally and internationally. Reports of massacres of Aborigines by police and settlers in central and northwest Australia had aroused considerable disquiet in the south eastern states and in Britain.¹⁰⁵ Neville was under pressure defending himself and the department against attacks both within and outside the state; such criticism was internalised by Neville who felt that it reflected on him and his department. Paul Hasluck in his autobiography recalled that Neville tried to 'make his job more important than any of his administrators, departmental or ministerial, thought it was' by asserting himself as 'virtually the sole proprietor of aborigines in Western Australia'.¹⁰⁶ Anna Haebich comments that from the late 1920s Neville was 'assuming an increasingly tyrannical role in Aboriginal affairs...[H]e dominated his Ministers...who had little experience in Aboriginal affairs...He brooked no opposition to his ideas from his own colleagues and others working with Aborigines'.¹⁰⁷ Piddington, by publicly criticising the treatment of Aborigines inadvertently, 'stirred up the community and provoked old antipathies',¹⁰⁸ and was therefore subjected to the full rancour of Neville. Neville, perhaps unreasonably, saw in Piddington, as he did in anthropology, an ally who would support his efforts, provide an objective voice of support. In this his expectations were unfulfilled.

Thus Neville, by acknowledging Piddington's version of events, would have not only caused added problems in the administration of Aboriginal policy but also have eroded his authority. He therefore had little choice but to deny and discredit Piddington, hence his persistent trivialising of Piddington's allegations, and his focus on Piddington's erratic behaviour and intemperate habits. He was fortunate that in the ANRC he found willing and uncritical allies, who were more concerned with the continuance of the research program than the conditions and treatment of Aboriginal people.¹⁰⁹ We are therefore led to a conclusion that reveals a determined effort by Neville to mislead the ANRC, his Minister and the public. The beneficiary of this deceit was Neville himself. The sandalwood cutters and Spurling benefited indirectly as did the ANRC and anthropological research. Aborigines and Piddington were the losers.

In the November 1936 issue of *Man*, Piddington wrote a short comment on the Report of the Royal Commissioner. He noted that

The Report is a comprehensive and carefully balanced summary of the evidence presented to the Commission. But, since there is no doubt of the Commissioner's

¹⁰⁴ Hodges to Neville, 31 January 1936. ACC993, 27/36.

¹⁰⁵ These included the Onmalmeri (Forrest River) Massacre in the Kimberley in 1926 and the Coniston Massacre near Alice Springs in 1928. See Green 1995.

¹⁰⁶ Hasluck 1977, p. 40.

¹⁰⁷ Haebich 1988, p. 255

¹⁰⁸ Jacobs 1990, p. 201.

¹⁰⁹ Firth to author, February 1993.

thoroughness and impartiality, it seems that such evidence has not been adequate to reveal the extent and seriousness of the abuses which, it is admitted, occur in 'isolated cases'...[A]n itinerant Commissioner must necessarily experience difficulty in reaching a true appreciation of the position.¹¹⁰

Little had changed.

Geoffrey Gray is a Research Fellow at the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, Canberra.

References

- Biskup, Peter. 1973, *Not Slaves, Not Citizens the aboriginal problem in Western Australia 1898-1954*. St Lucia.
- Cowlishaw, Gillian. 1990, 'Helping Anthropologists: cultural continuity in the constructions of Aboriginality', *Canberra Anthropology*, vol. 13 (2), pp. 1-28.
- Firth, Raymond. 1998, 'Anthropologists and Aborigines sixty-five years ago', *Australian Aboriginal Studies*. 1/1998 (in press).
- Gray, Geoffrey. 1993, 'Sympathetic collaboration: anthropologists, the ANRC and government', *The Olive Pink Society Bulletin*, vol. 5 (2), 1993, pp. 23-28.
- 1994, 'Piddington's indiscretion: Ralph Piddington, the Australian National Research Council and Academic Freedom', *Oceania*, vol. 64 (3), 1994, pp. 217-245.
- 1996, "'The natives are happy": A.P. Elkin and A.O. Neville and Anthropological Research in Northwestern Western Australia, 1927-28'. *Journal of Australian Studies*. no. 50/51, pp. 106-117.
- 1997, 'Mr Neville did all in his power to assist me': A.P. Elkin, A.O. Neville and Anthropological Research in Northwest Western Australia, 1927-1928. *Oceania*, vol. 68(1), pp. 27-46.
- 1998, '(This often) Sympathetic Collaboration: anthropologists, academic freedom and government', *Humanities Research*, 2/1998, pp. 37-61.
- Green, Neville. 1995, *The Forrest River Massacres*, Fremantle.
- Haebich, Anna. 1988, *For Their own good: Aborigines and Government in the Southwest of Western Australia, 1900-1940*. Nedlands.
- Hasluck, Paul. 1977, *Mucking About: An Autobiography*. Melbourne.
- Jacobs, Pat. 1990, *Mister Neville*, Fremantle.
- Mulvaney, D.J. 1988, 'Australian Anthropology and ANZAAS 'Strictly Scientific and Critical'', in R MacLeod (ed.) *A Commonwealth of Science, ANZAAS and the Scientific Enterprise in Australia, 1888-1988*. Melbourne.
- 1990, 'Australian Anthropology since Darwin: Models, Foundations and Funding', paper presented to the Canada-Australia Workshop on Science and Technology, University of Victoria, British Columbia, July 1990.
- 1993, 'Australian Anthropology: Foundations and Funding', *Aboriginal History*, vol. 17 (2), pp. 105-128.

¹¹⁰. Piddington 1936.

- Peterson, Nicolas. 1990, 'Studying Man and Man's Nature: the history of the institutionalisation of Aboriginal anthropology'. *Australian Aboriginal Studies*, 2/1990, pp. 3-19.
- Piddington, Ralph. 1933, 'Psychological Aspects of Culture Contact', *Oceania*, vol. 3 (3), pp. 312-324.
- 1936, 'Report of the Royal Commissioner appointed to investigate, Report and Advise upon matters in relation to the Condition and Treatment of Aborigines (Western Australia)', *Man*, no. 258, pp. 196-197.
- Piddington, Marjorie and Ralph Piddington. 1932, 'Report of Fieldwork in North-western Australia', *Oceania*, vol. 2 (3), pp. 342-358.
- Reynolds, Henry. 1998, *This Whispering in Our Hearts*. Sydney
- Wise, Tigger. 1985, *The Self Made Anthropologist. A Life of A.P. Elkin*. Sydney,