

## Opium and Race Relations in Queensland

by Andrew Gillett

Fiona Foley's *Black Opium* recognises a historically significant moment in the social history of Queensland and Australia more broadly. In 1897 the Queensland colonial government enacted legislation, *The Aboriginal Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act*, that established the framework of government control of Aboriginal affairs throughout the following century. The 1897 Act put into effect the first official system of reserves for Aboriginal populations and of close regulation of Aboriginal individuals who remained in wider society. But the Act also included a complete ban on a non-therapeutic drug, opium, the first major involvement of Australian governments in what would be a long history of international drug restriction and law enforcement. In this Act, two preoccupations of colonial administrators coalesced: the conflict-ridden relations between white settler society and Aboriginal communities, and anxieties about the Chinese presence in Australia, expressed through pejorative views about the 'moral vice' of opium. The two concerns of the 1897 Act reinforced each other, each providing moral justification for the other and alleviating white society of uncomfortable awareness of culpability: for its role in the devastation of Aboriginal communities, and for the harm caused in China and in Chinese colonial communities by the international British opium trade, of which the importation of opium into Queensland was one small offshoot. The 1897 Act represents a spasm in international racial ideas and moral anxieties played out in Queensland colonial policy.

The drafters of the 1897 Act looked to two existing frameworks to control and, in their terms, protect Aboriginal populations: reserves and reformatory establishments. In its provisions for the establishment of reserves and the forced removal of Aboriginal people there, the Act imitated the policy of the USA government since the 1820s of large-scale relocation of 'Indian' communities from the eastern American states to areas that were, initially, far from the main European populations. In the late 1870s, several areas north of Brisbane and outside coastal cities had been gazetted for use as Aboriginal reserves. Occupied voluntarily and administered by church figures through a government Aboriginal Commission, the reserves soon floundered in the face of opposition from pastoralists. The new reserves established under the 1897 Act had a stronger legal basis and were directly controlled by government officials, the Protectors of Aborigines, who had power to forcibly relocate individuals and groups there and to prosecute non-Aborigines who infringed on the reserves or otherwise abused individuals under the Act. Despite a humanitarian interest underlying this scheme, in practice the policy uprooted Aboriginal communities and forced collocation with other peoples on strange lands.

The removal of whole communities, however, was not the exclusive purpose of the 1897 Act, notwithstanding the increasing number of reserves established under its provisions in the following decades. Such large-scale relocation would have been expensive for the government to maintain, and would have removed a source of cheap labour from white employers in towns and stations. Alongside its provisions for reserves, the 1897 Act also empowered the Protectors of Aborigines to regulate the living and employment conditions of individuals who remained in contact with white society. This included prosecuting employers who exploited Aboriginal workers in pastoral or household labours, but where the Protectors thought necessary they could relocate to reserves individuals, including children, deemed 'at risk' of economic or sexual abuse or suffering from disease. These provisions of the 1897 Act reflected earlier legislation for reformatory schools for wayward children, introduced in England to address social dislocation caused by industrialisation and the growth of cities and subsequently imitated in the Australian colonies.

The reserve and regulation provisions of the 1897 Queensland Act were imitated in Western Australia (in 1905) and in South Australia with regard to the Northern Territory (1910). The Queensland Act was justified by the desire to protect Aboriginal populations from morally offensive exploitation by both white and Chinese employers, but it remains debatable, given the scarce financial resources allocated to maintenance of the reserves, to what extent its actual operation was motivated by real if harsh commitment to the inhabitants' well-being, and to what extent the reserves served to sequester individuals who were not economically useful to white society.

The 1897 Queensland Act was largely instigated by Archibald Meston, a former journalist and parliamentarian who wrote reports on the state of Aboriginal communities in the colony for the Queensland Home Secretary, Sir Horace Tozer, and contributed to the drafting of the bill enacted as the 1897 Act; Meston was appointed as one of the two new Protector of Aborigines under the Act (an extract of Meston's 189\* report on the Aboriginal community of Fraser Island forms part of *Black Opium*, and is reproduced at p. \*\* below). Meston and other supporters of the 1897 Act were motivated on the one hand by fears of racial miscegenation and on the other by humanitarian concern over the destructive impact of white society and its 'civilized vices' on Aboriginal communities. But the introduction into Parliament of a bill proposing a system of Aboriginal reserves and regulations did not enjoy wide support: representatives of town and pastoral employers, who had already overturned the short-lived reserve system of the 1870s, were antagonistic to potential restrictions of their use of Aboriginal labour. It was with an eye to this opposition that the bill introduced by Tozer included provisions restricting the sale of opium both to Aborigines and more widely, as a tactic to exploit the potent image of the drug. It is striking that Meston's first report, detailing a disturbing range of ills affecting Aboriginal communities, made no mention of opium, but a second report commissioned by Tozer in preparation for the new bill emphasised this 'detestable drug' as a prime example of the need for a system of Aboriginal reserves.

By the 1890s, the narcotic opium had been invested in the European imagination with a complex array of alarming qualities, making it a potent receptacle of anxieties including fears of racial miscegenation and 'moral infestation' from the Chinese population. The use of opium as a recreational or self-tranquilizing drug had arisen directly from the international European colonial trade network. The product of poppies of India and Asia Minor (Turkey), opium had been used since antiquity for medicinal purposes. In Britain and Europe, opium imported from Ottoman Turkey, used since the Middle Ages for therapeutic purposes, increasingly featured as a pain-killer in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in medicinal compounds to be eaten or drunk, particularly laudanum, a mixture of opium and alcohol. Cholera outbreaks in Britain in the 1830s popularised and spread the therapeutic use of opium, as former doctors of the British army in India demonstrated its value in relieving fever, pain, and diarrhoea. Opium became a mainstay of both professional and self-administered medicine, though with some restrictions from the 1860s because of concerns over immoderate use, particularly as a sedative for infants in industrial slums.

In China opium had a different history, beginning in the early eighteenth century as the Manchu imperial government banned, with surprising success, the use of smoking tobacco, which had been introduced through western trade. As tobacco supplies shrank, wealthy users substituted Indian opium, a different subspecies from the Turkish variety. A new means of consumption was developed to adjust for the different natures of tobacco and opium: smoking by heating small amounts of liquid opium over a flame in a pipe (as most of the active elements of opium are inert, this form of consumption meant that only a small proportion of opiates is actually consumed, unlike European opium preparations such as laudanum). Although the Manchu government, in 1729, also banned opium use, its use ballooned, fed by trade in Indian opium dominated by the British East India Company. Importation of opium into Canton (Guandong) Province in contravention of Chinese imperial law became the lynch-pin of British trade with China, funding British imports of silk and especially tea, but infuriating the Manchu government by subverting merchants and officials in Canton and draining silver supplies. The 1849-1856 Opium Wars, prosecuted by Britain in response to Chinese attempts to enforce the ban on opium, decisively forced British interests on the Chinese government, but ultimately undercut the British opium trade by legitimising the cultivation of poppies within China. By the 1880s, Chinese opium production for domestic use more than doubled the Indian export crop, squeezing British-Indian opium out of the market, and by the first decade of the twentieth century, Britain was prepared to relinquish its much diminished opium trade in the face of the international anti-opium movement that had developed since the Opium Wars.

The Chinese sojourner communities attracted by the gold-rushes of California and Australia regularly used opium in what Europeans pejoratively called 'opium dens.' These establishments, owned and run by Chinese merchants or immigrant associations, provided social centres for the overwhelmingly male sojourner and immigrant communities. Although some Canton merchants sent their sons overseas in part to escape the growing domestic culture of opium use, the colonial situation may have encouraged the use of opium-smoking. Originally an elite practice within China, opium use spread only gradually to other parts of society through the nineteenth century as increased domestic production made opium more affordable, and does not seem to have become widespread among the peasant class within China until the 1870s. But in the Australian colonies, opium-smoking seems to have become more common earlier among the predominantly

peasant-class diggers who travelled there. Moreover Chinese observers within Australia felt that personal rates of opium use in the colonies were high, although comparative data is negligible (a limited picture of consumption can be drawn from colonial import statistics, as opium was subject to import duty in all Australian colonies, one reason that nineteenth-century governments were reluctant to follow the anti-opium movement's calls to ban this 'vice'). Both the difficult conditions of life for sojourner labourers, and commercial exploitation by some Chinese merchants, encouraged high recreational use. But opium was also used in Chinese sojourner communities, as in European societies, for a range of therapeutic effects, particularly in malaria-affected areas such as northern Queensland, and was valued as a means to relieve fatigue.

The decline of opium-smoking in colonial Chinese communities at the end of the century reflected a number of social changes. It was in part a generational change, reflecting different attitudes of younger Chinese colonial merchants wishing to move away from opium importing and management of opium dens as a financial base. It was also an effect of the international anti-opium movement. This campaign arose on its European side directly from the British anti-slavery movement, and objected to the British government's involvement in feeding opium addiction in China by abrogating Chinese sovereignty. The Chinese side of the movement developed from the nascent Chinese nationalist movement, incensed at first at western impositions on China and later by the Manchu imperial government's acquiescence in the opium trade and its profits from taxing domestic poppy production. Both aspects of the movement combined in anti-opium movements in the Australian colonies of the 1880s-1900s, a cause best known for the active promotion of Quong Tart (Mei Guangda), a charismatic Canton-born Sydney tea merchant and quasi-official liaison between the Sydney Chinese community and New South Wales government. When the new Commonwealth government banned the import of non-medical opium in 1906, it was as part of its obligations to the first international agreements on the restriction of drug trade.

The Chinese opium den was an object of fascination for European observers throughout the late nineteenth century, an acknowledged foreign vice imported into western territories. Lurid portrayals of the abject subjugation of opium users to their habit appeared in the popular presses of California and the Australian colonies – apparent confirmation of the long tradition of European 'orientalising' views of eastern peoples as decadent and slavish. Opium dens, like festivities such as Chinese New Year, were at all times curiosities to white neighbours, but the strong racial hostility engendered by the goldfields cast a more sinister light on Chinese use of the drug. Concerns were intermittently raised about visits to opium dens by well-to-do male members of the colonial demimonde. These concerns were fed and misinformed by the fame of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's opium-induced poetic visions and, even more, the 1821 memoirs of the British Romantic litterateur Thomas De Quincey, *Confessions of an English Opium Eater*, which described hallucinogenic experiences brought on by addiction to British therapeutic compounds of Turkish opium. De Quincey was cited as an authority on drug-induced decadence in almost every colonial parliamentary debate and journal lamenting white visitors to opium dens. His images of dissolute languor lodged as a motif for writers and artists such as John Fordel Henderson, whose poetry collection, *The Opium Slave*, published in Brisbane in 1913, drew on the Romantic vocabulary of tortured sensibility seeking refuge in opium-smoking. But the relevance of De Quincey's questionable account of his vivid dream visions to anxieties over Chinese opium use was negligible, as the various forms of opiate use had widely differing properties. In 1895 a Victorian parliamentarian had passages of De Quincey's visions translated into Cantonese and read to residents of Melbourne's Chinatown; they were duly laughed at as nonsense.

The greatest concern expressed in the colonial press and parliaments, however, was the alleged Chinese use of opium to seduce, drug, and enslave young white women to be kept as concubines or prostitutes. From the 1870s, the moral degradation of white women was a mainstay of publications such as *The Bulletin* and *The Boomerang* in Brisbane, epitomised in the 1888 short story "Mr and Mrs Sin Fat" by writer Edward Dyson and illustrator Phil May who enthusiastically dramatised these fears of opium-induced sexual corruption; it appears in a more restrained way in a rare Tom Roberts etching, *A Chinese Cook Shop*, of 1887. It was the corruption of women, with its implications of moral infection and miscegenation, that recurred most vehemently in calls to restrict or remove Chinese populations from towns. The persistence of these fears was fed in part by the reality of white women cohabitating with Chinese men in 'Chinatowns,' a phenomenon explicable to conventional white views only by this scenario of seduction and corruption. An exceptional verbatim record of eight women who lived with Chinese men in Sydney's Chinatown is preserved

in the transcript of witnesses' evidence of an 1891 New South Wales Royal Commission into 'Chinese Gambling and Immorality.' Asked by the commissioners (including Quong Tart) whether they had been

seduced into their relationships through opium 'doping,' all vehemently denied the suggestion; instead their personal stories reveal a consistent pattern of distress and rejection from white society – because of illegitimate pregnancy, marital abandonment, or enforced prostitution – that led them reluctantly to seek shelter in Chinese fringe communities and there unexpectedly to find appreciative monogamous relations. As one of the women put it sharply, 'I would rather live with a Chinaman than I would with a white man. The Chinamen know how to treat a woman.'

Such rare testimony made little headway against increasingly histrionic popular xenophobia. Even as opium use among colonial Chinese communities declined in the 1890s, its popular image as a vector for moral and racial corruption grew more sharply defined, fed on the one hand by growing anti-Chinese xenophobia and on the other by the reformist humanitarian concerns of the anti-opium movement. In debates over control and protection of Aboriginal populations in Queensland and elsewhere, this potent image of moral vice could be transferred with rhetorical impact, substituting the supposed racial inferiority of Aboriginal peoples for the gender inferiority of women as justification for paternalistic protection. Concerns about opium use among Aboriginal communities, primarily those adjacent pastoral stations or in fringe-settlements outside country towns, began to appear in the late 1870s and 1880s, simultaneous with anxieties about Chinese and white opium-smoking. In Archibald Meston's 1896 report on Aboriginal conditions, and in subsequent parliamentary debates and press reports, opium use was blamed as the primary cause for both declining health and social break-down among Aboriginal communities. The heated rhetoric and lack of accurate medical reports makes it difficult to assess the accuracy of these claims; opium use need not, by itself, cause physical harm, but it may be symptomatic of depression or other health issues. It does appear, however, that opium consumption was widespread throughout Aboriginal communities in the colony. In debates over the bill for the Queensland *Aboriginal Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act*, the need to sever the corrupting influence of Chinese employers was successfully put forward as a central justification for the introduction of protective control over Aboriginal communities.

The main form of Aboriginal opium use was not smoking of Chinese opium or consumption of western opium therapeutic compounds, but drinking a mixture of opium ash, the residue of smoking-opium left in the pipe bowl, mixed with water. Ash residue in fact retained most of the active narcotic elements of opium, too inert to rise in smoke; ash from used smoking-opium was re-sold by colonial Chinese merchants, and even imported from China. This consumption was usually communal, a tub of ash-water shared around a circle, and may have had therapeutic purposes, alleviating the symptoms of malaria and other, introduced diseases; reports of continued Aboriginal opium use in the 1900s mainly came from northern Queensland, where Chinese labourers had long used opium to ameliorate tropical disorders.

How this opium use first entered Aboriginal societies is unclear. In debates for Aboriginal protection measures it was frequently claimed to have been paid to Aboriginal pastoral or town labourers as part of their wages, or sold by station-owners as a way of reclaiming wages paid. Although both white and Chinese employers were accused of this practice, blame was usually attributed to the Chinese for initiating and continuing the practice; white employers claimed to be forced to follow suit in order to be able to induce Aboriginal labour. Its adoption may also have been influenced by pre-existing patterns of use of indigenous drugs. Early reports of Aboriginal opium use tend to emphasise central western Queensland, which was roughly the same area that produced and used a native psychoactive drug, pituri, produced from the leaves of the flowering shrub *Duboisia Hopwoodii*. Strictly controlled by elder members of the community and consumed only by adult males, pituri was traditionally used as a mental stimulant in important meetings, as a physical stimulant for long journeys, and as an anaesthetic. It was traded across Queensland into the Northern Territory, New South Wales, and South Australia. From the 1880s, however, there is evidence that the strict social controls of pituri consumption were collapsing, and that women and young men used it, for tranquillizing rather than stimulant effects, symptomatic of wider social break-down resulting from white settlement. Pituri was known to be used sometimes by pastoralists as part of wages for Aboriginal labour, and both tobacco and opium, more easily obtained by employers, may have been substituted for pituri in such transactions. Nevertheless the practice of consuming opium as ash-water imitated the drug-use patterns of neither Chinese opium-smoking nor European tobacco-smoking.

Despite opposition to restrictions placed on the use of Aboriginal labour and to committing public land for reserves, the 1897 Queensland Act was passed, to be echoed in the later Acts of Western Australia and South Australia, in significant part because of the complex anxieties associated with opium. Along with the establishment of the reserve system and regulations for Aboriginal employment, the Act provided both punishments for the supply of opium to Aboriginal people, and also a complete ban on importation and sale of non-medical opium. Those provisions were abrogated almost immediately by the colonial administration itself, reluctant to lose the annual revenue of over £25,000 from import duty on opium. Notwithstanding complaints of the Protectors of Aborigines appointed by the government, the importation restrictions would only be put into effect after the Commonwealth government passed national legislation in 1906 restricting trade in opium. Opium had served its purpose of displacing blame for the conditions of Aboriginal communities from white society to Chinese communities.

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#### **Further Reading**

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