The Aboriginal volumes of *The Dictionary of Western Australians*

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Sylvia Hallam, together with her friend the late Lois Tilbrook, made a major scholarly contribution through her work on *Aborigines of the Southwest Region, 1829–1840*, the first of four Aboriginal volumes in what later became the *Bicentennial Dictionary of Western Australians* series, which were initiated in the mid-1970s after a conversation with its general editor, Rica Erickson, and Dr Pamela Statham, editor of Volume 1 (Statham 1979). A sub-committee was subsequently formed to help complete the first volume and oversee the production of two further volumes with funding assistance from the Australian Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) and a fourth volume was produced by Neville Green and Susan Aguiar with AIATSIS assistance. To the New Norcia volume, which was initiated by Lois Tilbrook and completed by Neville Green, Sylvia also contributed an important analysis of the detailed Aboriginal census material collected by Bishop Salvado (Hallam 1989). In what follows, Neville Green provides a brief account of the history of the Aboriginal volumes project and then both Sylvia Hallam and Neville Green talk about their modus operandi. Inevitably, there are some inconsistencies between recollections of events for which records no longer exist, but this is a minor issue in a timely and revealing account of what continues to be a unique Aboriginal biographical undertaking. In addition to the four published volumes, the 31 unpublished annotated indexes of names extracted from specific primary sources, such as *The Perth Gazette* and the Colonial Secretary’s Office (CSO) files, now deposited with AIATSIS and the Battye Library, constitute an invaluable set of research tools for a broad range of studies in Aboriginal history in Western Australia, 1829–1892. Some of the card indexes produced in the project have also been deposited in the Battye Library, together with the tape-recording of interviews on which this paper is based.

**INTERVIEW WITH NEVILLE GREEN**

In 1976 when I became a staff member of the Aboriginal Teacher Education Project (ATEP) at Mt Lawley Teachers’ College (later Mt Lawley CAE) there was considerable interest in the Aborigines of the South-West. I had completed *Broken spears: Aborigines and Europeans in the southwest of Australia* (1984) and was working on *Nyungar the people: Aboriginal customs in the southwest of Australia* (1979). Lois Tilbrook was the anthropologist on the ATEP team, developing the South-West Aboriginal Studies (SWAS) programme with a substantial grant from AIATSIS. Lois drew on a rich range of genealogical material, including photographs and interviews with elders collected by Cherry Hayward, Kayleen Hayward, Clarrie Ugle and Liesha Kickett (now Eades), which she later used in her book *Nyungar tradition: glimpses of Aborigines of south-western Australia, 1829–1914* (Tilbrook 1987). Anna Haebich was Research Officer for the programme, supervising and training the Nyoongah research assistants. In 1981, with Lois, she produced an annotated *South West Aboriginal Studies Bibliography* (Haebich and Tilbrook 1981) and a touring exhibition of genealogical charts and photographs displayed at Mt Lawley, Albany, Narrogin and Bunbury. The charts were added to and modified over time by Nyoongah people who were also tracing the history of their families. Lois employed Toni Creed to extract Aboriginal-related material from Swan River Papers (despatches from Governor Stirling to the Colonial Office) and from the Colonial Secretary’s correspondence during the first few years of settlement.
Rica Erickson, who was then editing a major biographical project documenting immigration to Western Australia in the 19th century as part of the commemoration of the sesquicentenary of European settlement (1829–1979), was concerned at the dearth of ‘ethnic’ and Aboriginal representation in the work in progress. Anne Atkinson was subsequently commissioned to edit a volume on Asian immigrants and Lois was approached by Rica to gather up some Aboriginal names for the main volumes. Rica also asked me if I could find names other than Anglo-Celtic ones to add to the ‘Golden’ volume (1890s–1914) that she was working on at the time. Out of all this came the idea of an Aboriginal biographical series.

Rica, Sylvia Hallam, Ken Colbung, Bob Reece, Lois Tilbrook and I formed an Aboriginal dictionary sub-committee to recruit and supervise the research assistants. We made a successful application for AIATSIS funding for 1981–1982 to support the research. The researchers were mostly History and Anthropology students from Murdoch University and the University of Western Australia, guided by Lois and myself. The initial aim had been to complete a South-West volume covering the first decade, but as the research progressed it became apparent that the archival sources had been underestimated and that there was scope for additional volumes.

Later members of the committee were Anna Haebich, Jennifer Sabioni and Harry Taylor, while I continued to act as chair. Tilbrook, Hallam, Haebich and I made a further successful application to AIATSIS for funding in 1982. This was exhausted by 1984 but volunteers continued to work until 1989. During that time, they examined the files of the CSO for the years 1829 to 1887 and the major Western Australian newspapers, 1833–1889. At that stage in the history of what is now the State Record Office of Western Australia (SROWA), the indexing and cataloguing of records was incomplete and the CSO letters received and reports from Resident Magistrates and the Police Department were in numbered boxes. The research assistants worked through these boxes, examining each document and creating separate cards for each Aboriginal name and a brief explanation of the context. Lois arranged for the information on the cards to be typed initially by Mt Lawley ATEP into what were eventually to be 31 bound volumes (see Appendix). Additional funding from AIATSIS obtained by me in 1990 enabled my daughter, Susan Moon (now Aguilar), to collate and type into three volumes all the previously unpublished names contained in these 31 volumes (Green and Moon 1993?, 1993, 1997).

The funding for the publication came from the Australian Bicentennial Authority, which meant we had a deadline to publish three volumes in 1988. Four Aboriginal biographical dictionary volumes were subsequently published by University of Western Australia Press as part of the Bicentennial Dictionary of Western Australians series: Aborigines of the Southwest Region 1829–1840 (1989), compiled and edited by Hallam and Tilbrook, The Aborigines of the Albany Region 1821–1898 (1989), compiled by myself, and The Aborigines of New Norcia 1845–1914 (1989) compiled by Tilbrook and myself. Independent research of the files of the police and prisons departments as well as the Aborigines Department supplemented the original research for the final volume, Far From Home: Aboriginal Prisoners of Rottnest Island 1838–1931 (1993), compiled by myself and Susan Moon. Unpublished volumes of names and sources for the Murchison, Pilbara and Kimberley, compiled again by myself and Susan Moon, were deposited with AIATSIS and the Battye Library.

In the first instance, the paid research assistants sifted through files and when the AIATSIS grant was not renewed after 1984 the task was continued by volunteer student researchers from Edith Cowan University as well as Murdoch University and the University of Western Australia. The researchers included Lisa Smith, Jean Boladeras, Carolyn McKay, Linley Chandler, Carol West, Sarah Godden, Mary-Anne Jebb, Milada Zlatnik, Suzanne Charteris, Rosemary Combs, Wendy Craig, Suzanne Hutchinson, David Moore, Annette Oates, Delys Parker, Andrew and Janet Thompson, Fiona Watson, Susan Hunt, Rita Zuk, Katie Ward, Lynda Strawbridge, Fiona Callaghan, Alison Klauss and Leonie Biggins (Stella). Mary Green and Andrea Green researched issues of the Police Gazette. Typing up the carded information was the work of Cynthia Munday, Janice Bryant, Isobel Stanners, Jean Riley, Tricia Muir and Susan Moon and others who contributed were Joyce Oakley, Wendy Aamodt, and Bonnie Hicks. Significantly, a number of the research assistants went on to distinguish themselves in honours and postgraduate work in Aboriginal history and archaeology. Lois Tilbrook and Anna Haebich both completed PhDs with South-West themes and Sylvia published several excellent articles about the Aboriginal men and women of Perth in the foundation years (see bibliography, this volume, for a full listing).

Those engaged in the project shared the belief that work of this nature would contribute to a better understanding of the role of Aboriginal people in the history of Western Australia. The published volumes have subsequently proved to be a starting point for indigenous people engaged in family history as well as for historians and anthropologists undertaking Native Title research. The Rottnest Island volume has also proved to be invaluable in
the reconciliation programme for the island.

INTERVIEW WITH SYLVIA HALLAM

Reece: Do you recall the circumstances of getting involved in the biographical project?

Hallam: Lois [Tilbrook] and I had both been working on lists of Aborigines at [the time of] contact without knowing that the other was doing it. I was doing an archaeological survey of an area centred on the Swan River and eventually it came down to a section of the coastal plain and I wanted to look at population change over time and use of land change over time. And of course the end point of that process is the point where pre-History becomes History. It’s always objected that the use of ethnographic material implies there is no change. [However,] the use of ethnographic material does not imply unchanging Aboriginal life, unchanging Aboriginal population. It gives you a baseline from which to plot that process of change, working backwards through time. Here was what it was like in 1830. What was it like two centuries earlier, 2,000 years earlier, 20,000 years earlier? To answer those questions I had to get an end point. I wanted to calibrate my scale. And I looked of course at those back through time (and unfortunately she suggested as a member but I’m not sure he ever came), Lois and myself (Anna Haebich came on to it later). Lois and I set to and we amalgamated our lists. My input was purely and simply what was the situation in the 1830s because that was what had interested me and because I was poaching on historians’ ground. I was, after all, a pre-historian. I never felt in a position to ask for funding, for research assistance. What I’d done, I’d done entirely on my own.

Reece: However, that committee did apply to AIATSIS and did get funds which were then used to employ researchers?

Hallam: Lois and Neville were the movers in the SWAS project; they were the base from which that operated and to which it returned its materials. And those materials were treated in various ways. The assistants had written up on cards anything they came across which gave Aboriginal names. Now, this had I think an unfortunate consequence: that if there was an important document with a bearing on Aboriginal matters but it didn’t give names, then it didn’t get included in the transcriptions. So material which could have been transcribed at the same time, even material on file which would have interested me as a landscape archaeologist, wasn’t transcribed. But they were working largely from The Perth Gazette and Colonial [Secretary’s] Office records.

Reece: You didn’t get involved in supervising the work of the research assistants?

Hallam: Not at all. That was supervised by Lois. And initially she organised for the data to be typed under source … and then once the cards had been typed by source, the cards themselves were resorted alphabetically so that Lois ended up with a list of alphabetically organised cards and I already had an alphabetical set of cards.

Reece: What happened when you came to mix and match your data with Lois’s?

Hallam: We just worked slowly through it. We met for days at a time, as often as we could, which wasn’t as often as we would have liked because each of us had other commitments. We would bring together both sets of cards and we would jointly outline an entry which Lois wrote down [in] longhand, and then she would take it away and she’d type it out that night and then we’d look at it. Once it had been drafted, we both had input. We’d say: ‘Look, we haven’t explained what exactly it is
that's happening here. It looks to me as though this and this is going on, though the observers haven't actually realised that. So we'd put in interpretative things and we'd both contribute to that. And as we went further we'd sometimes track back and something we were looking at later would give us a new insight or new information about something written earlier. And undoubtedly we missed material. I know about material that we missed. 

**Reece:** And you were dealing initially in your archaeological work with an area of coastal plain and inland forest centred on the Swan River? And what was your population estimate for that area?

**Hallam:** I came to an estimated minimum figure of 420 persons over roughly 1,900 square miles, that is, around 25 persons to each 100 square miles, or 10 people per 100 square km. I know that everybody since then has been engaged with population, it's the angle I came in on, but so many other interests came out of the Swan material that it was no longer the focus by the time we'd finished. It was my initial focus, but a whole lot of other foci came up. The question of the Swan River population as such was not seen as something that was particularly relevant when we were writing the *Dictionary*.

**Reece:** So what was your agenda?

**Hallam:** It wasn't so much an agenda we set as an agenda that emerged eventually. It was an interest in people. The stories we'd written brought to life. It wasn't so much an agenda we set as an agenda that emerged eventually. It was an interest in people. The stories we'd written brought to life. It wasn't so much an agenda we set as an agenda that emerged eventually. It was an interest in people. The stories we'd written brought to life. It wasn't so much an agenda we set as an agenda that emerged eventually. It was an interest in people. The stories we'd written brought to life. It wasn't so much an agenda we set as an agenda that emerged eventually. It was an interest in people. The stories we'd written brought to life. It wasn't so much an agenda we set as an agenda that emerged eventually. It was an interest in people. The stories we'd written brought to life. It wasn't so much an agenda we set as an agenda that emerged eventually. It was an interest in people. The stories we'd written brought to life. It wasn't so much an agenda we set as an agenda that emerged eventually. It was an interest in people. The stories we'd written brought to life. It wasn't so much an agenda we set as an agenda that emerged eventually. It was an interest in people. The stories we'd written brought to life. It wasn't so much an agenda we set as an agenda that emerged eventually. It was an interest in people. The stories we'd written brought to life. It wasn't so much an agenda we set as an agenda that emerged eventually. It was an interest in people. The stories we'd written brought to life. It wasn't so much an agenda we set as an agenda that emerged eventually. It was an interest in people. The stories we'd written brought to life. It wasn't so much an agenda we set as an agenda that emerged eventually. It was an interest in people. The stories we'd written brought to life. It wasn't so much an agenda we set as an agenda that emerged eventually. It was an interest in people. The stories we'd written brought to life.

**Reece:** So you became interested in individuals?

**Hallam:** Not only that, but a number of ethnographic problems: the role of women, the way in which groups, individuals and families were attached to land, the multiple attachments, the multiple choice of attachments that any individual could have, and the parallel use of land. A man could have the right to dig for roots because it was his mother's land on which she had the right to dig for roots, and her mother's and her mother's. But he might also hold, somewhere else entirely, ritual rights through his father. He would also hold rights through his wife who would have a fairly determined relationship to him genealogically. And he could put into operation one or more of those options, but he would have so many options he couldn't put them all into effect. And eventually he would hold only those he'd used. This seemed to be the picture that was emerging.

**Reece:** You got involved in the issue of economic rights and territoriality?

**Hallam:** Or methods of land-holding. Yes, which is a very different thing from saying: 'Here is the territory of this tribe, and the individuals composing this tribe are ...', which the European sources seemed to put forward. The Europeans had come with this pattern in their minds. They tried to fit things into this pattern, but nothing would fit. And the notion that here were the boundaries and people stayed within them – well they didn't. They were able to guide Europeans across to the Avon Valley and then re-appear in the Canning. They'd gone across from Upper Swan, which Europeans saw as the territory of one group, to the territory of a totally different group, and come back to yet another territory in the terms that the European observers were using at that time.

**INTERVIEW WITH NEVILLE GREEN AND SYLVIA HALLAM**

**Neville Green:** I was involved in three volumes, the Albany volume and the New Norcia volume which I was doing at the same time, and later the Rottnest volume. The Albany volume set out to be something quite distinct from the others: it was more of a social history volume linking the historical references to these people rather than the genealogical references, and pertaining only to the Albany region. It combined the periods from 1829 to 1833 when Capt. Phillip Parker King, Capt. Collet Barker, Isaac Scott Nind and Dr Alexander Collie were noting Aboriginal names and customs. I see this early period as quite distinct as I indicate in the introduction to that volume. The second part begins with the Bland census of 1842 and continues on to about 1890.

**Reece:** When you say 'social history', you mean the history of Aborigines' interaction with whites?

**Green:** Yes, the references recorded by Europeans about these Aborigines, their participation in white society, rather than their customs and culture and relationships.

**Hallam:** But didn't it include all those things?

**Green:** It included those things but to a lesser degree, not to the extent that you and Lois did with the first volume.

**Hallam:** This was dictated by the material, this is what was in the material, rather than by a policy.

**Green:** But I think influenced by your discipline. The New Norcia volume again was quite different because it drew on material recorded at New Norcia and we had some difficulties with that, which I will mention later. The information was collected by the student researchers under the supervision of Lois Tilbrook and Anna Haebich. Then, for circumstances that I am not familiar with, Lois was absent from this programme and I took on the responsibility with my daughter, Tricia Muir, of collating and completing the cross-referencing the cards and it was then typed by Tricia, who also typed the Albany volume. I see it as a distinct volume because it used mission material to create a genealogical source that has become most useful for Nyungah people and some Yamatji people to
construct their family histories.

Reece: How did you come to know about the New Norcia material?

Hallam: Rica told me about that material at a time when there was an exhibition of New Norcia records in one of the banks in the CBD and I went to look at it. Somebody had mixed the labels and the first document was labelled: ‘Stud Book of the Horses of New Norcia’ and further along there was a list labelled ‘Aborigines at New Norcia’. The two lists were kept as carefully as the other. My Spanish was non-existent, but I did think that caballos had to mean horses and not Aborigines! And I later went with my husband to New Norcia to look at and transcribe all the Aboriginal lists.

Reece: Neville, What was your agenda with the New Norcia volume?

Green: My agenda was merely to get the volume completed. I had no personal involvement other than that. I helped choose the pictures and I also arranged for Fiona Callaghan to go through the collection in the Battye Library that had been placed there I believe by Fr Rooney with no restrictions on use. Unfortunately, her list was not published but copies are held by New Norcia and the Battye. We looked at the New Norcia ones listed by Fiona and I chose those to use in the book. Now, between the time when we started the project and the book came to publication, Fr Rooney was no longer the Abbot, and Placid Spearritt was the Prior of the monastery and he had a different outlook on these photographs. When I went to him for final approval, he was most reluctant and we met and talked about it and he said he saw them as having a commercial value to the mission and if we were permitted to publish them, then it would diminish their value to New Norcia. Also, he did not want names to go beyond 1914 in case they were used for claims for inheritance by part-Aboriginal people. So that’s why that volume ends at 1914 and does not go beyond.

Reece: So he put his foot down?

Green: He put his foot down. I put the unpublished cards in the Battye Library and hopefully they are still there. But he was not happy about us using the photographs and would not give his permission. So I wrote a letter asking did he regard the monastery as the owner of these indigenous records and photographs or the custodian for the benefit of Aboriginal people? And he reluctantly gave permission. Now, following on from that came the question of: who has the right to permit people to use those photographs? Fr Rooney gave them to the Battye and thousands of dollars were spent restoring them but there was a legal issue somewhere and New Norcia reclaimed them. So we were lucky at that time to complete that volume. But I think that a very important part of the volume was the census [contributed by Hallam] that forms an Appendix. Sylvia’s contribution is really valuable.

Hallam: I have already commented on how magnificent the census is. My husband [Professor Herbert Hallam] told me that European demographic records start with ninth century Benedictine documents and it seems to me that detailed Aboriginal population documents start with 19th century Benedictine documents of New Norcia.

Reece: Tell us about the circumstances behind the two introductions to the New Norcia volume.

Green: Lois was absent while the volume was being edited and prepared for publication and upon her return she felt that the introduction that I had done was inadequate to express her views on the project and so she felt obliged to contribute a second introduction. It was too late for me to attempt to merge the two, considering at that time my own agenda was to complete the two volumes I had started on, the Albany and New Norcia volumes, complete the Oombulgurri Story for the Kimberley Oombulgurri community (also a Bicentennial project), complete my history PhD and carry a full lecture load. I was also preparing to leave in January 1989 for a year in China so it was a very, very busy year. I could not give the time to merging the two and so I sent her introduction on to the publisher. When Tom Stannage reviewed this volume he puzzled at a book having two introductions.

Reece: On reflection, how do you feel about the first volumes and what they contributed?

Green: The earlier ones I saw (I tend to be driven by timetables and schedules) as having to be completed by the Bicentenary 1988 deadline. And then Rottnest Island was still a problem to me because there was so much nonsense being written about it by the press and others and it seemed important to make clear what had happened there.

Reece: How did you get on to the Rottnest volume?

Green: Because there was so much material, particularly as I worked with students in the later collated volumes up to 1887 and many of those reports were dominated by Aboriginal people being arrested and sent to Rottnest Island. I’ll just explain how complex the Rottnest book was using the primitive computers of that time and I had to make sure that ‘Jim’ and ‘Tim’ were different people. The original archived files were in a 19th century style of writing and the student researchers might read a ‘w’ as ‘m’ or ‘f’ as ‘t’ or as ‘j’. I was using a primitive computer data file programme on an 800 kb Macintosh computer that accepted
only one line of data and could only sort by the first item. I had to cram onto that one line, name, year of admission, prison number, home region, sentence, death or release year and my reference code to the typed volumes of names and details. When I had about 8,000 entries I tried to sort them into alpha order, but it was too large for the Mac so I cut the list into sections which were sorted and collated and then placed the year at the front to the line and repeated the process. My daughter, Susan, came on to the project and by then I had a better computer and software and together we worked our way through the records and that’s why it took until 1995 to complete the Rottnest book.

Hallam: It’s as well that Lois and so much earlier I worked with even more primitive materials, pencils and paper!

Green: It’s very difficult. I don’t think that people really appreciate the task or even the unique nature of this project. Professor Peter Sutton said to me: ‘If only the other states had similar biographical dictionaries of Aboriginal people, the task of anthropologists and historians in Native Title would be so much easier’.

Reece: Did you have any contact with Diane Barwick about all this? A national biographical data base was her idea.

Green: No, not at all. But we did give to AIATSIS and the Battye Library the published volumes and the collated volumes and all the materials that Susan and I collated in 1991 have also been made available on hard copy and compact disc. The 1991 project resulted in three typed volumes: Aboriginal names of the South West c. 1841–1890; Aboriginal names of the Murchison District c. 1848–1890, and a composite volume of Aboriginal names of the Pilbara c. 1870–1890; the Gascoyne c. 1880–1890; the Kimberley c. 1880–1890; the Pilbara c. 1870–1890; the Gascoyne c. 1880–1890; the Kimberley c. 1880–1890. Unpublished MS, Battye Library: Perth.

Reece: What happens with all the additional information that comes to light, additions, changes?

Green: At this stage about all I can do is write it in the front of one of my volumes and add it in a later edition.

Reece: What feedback do you get on the value of from your work?

Green: I think the greatest feedback I get is when I go into Battye Library and I see Aboriginal people using the volumes, and when they phone me for family information. That is the satisfaction that I get, to know that the volumes are being used. As for our Rottnest volume, it was a key factor in establishing the archaeological and historical relevance of the island to a major reconciliation programme that was launched in February 2009. Without this as a source document, there would be no strong evidence of the extent of Aboriginal links, state-wide, to Rottnest. The New Norcia volume was superb in establishing Aboriginal genealogies. The social history of the Albany volume gave people a better view of the relationship between Europeans and Aborigines from first contact to the end of the 19th century. And the Tilbrook and Hallam volume was of enormous value for the Native Title case over the metropolitan area. It identified people and their families, described their lifestyles, how they interacted with other family groups and all with a thoroughness that simply could not be disputed. All the volumes are of immeasurable benefit to Aboriginal people, historians and other researchers because they are meticulously referenced to their sources.

REFERENCES


APPENDIX: LIST OF ANNOTATED INDEXES AND OTHER RESEARCH MATERIALS PREPARED AS PART OF THE DICTIONARY OF WESTERN AUSTRALIANS ABORIGINAL VOLUMES PROJECT, FOR THE PERIOD 1829–1892

1. ‘A Glance at the Manners, And Language of the Aboriginal Inhabitants of Western Australia, with a short vocabulary’ by R.M. Lyon, The Perth Gazette and Western Australian Journal, 30 March, 6, 13 and 20 April 1833.
2. ‘Manners and Habits of the Aborigines of Western Australia, From Information Collected by Mr. F. Armstrong, Interpreter’, *The Perth Gazette and Western Australian Journal*, 29 October, 5 and 12 November 1836.


14. *The Australian Advertiser* [Albany], 8 June 1888–9 December 1892.


17. Colonial Secretary’s Office Letters Received, 1842, Vol. 108 [The Bland Census, 1842].

18. Colonial Secretary’s Office Letters Received: Resident Magistrates Volumes, 1840–1845.


20. Colonial Secretary’s Office Letters Received, 1850–1855: Guardian of Aborigines and Resident Magistrates Volumes.


22. Colonial Secretary’s Office Letters Received, 1860–1864.

23. Colonial Secretary’s Office Letters Received, 1865–1869.

24. Colonial Secretary’s Office Letters Received: Resident Magistrates Volumes, 1870–1879.

25. Colonial Secretary’s Office Records Letters Received, 1870–1879.

26. Colonial Secretary’s Office Letters Received: Rottnest Correspondence 1876–1892.

27. Colonial Secretary’s Office Letters Received, 1880–1884.

28. Colonial Secretary’s Office Letters Received, 1885.

29. Colonial Secretary’s Office Letters Received, 1887.

30. Colonial Secretary’s Office Letters Received: Vol. 37, No. 124. Rottnest Correspondence from January 1892 (throughout 1892).

31. The King George Sound Journals of Capt. Collet Barker, December 1829–March 1831.