Pat Jacobs, Mr Neville, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, $19.99.

'Mister' Auber Octavius Neville seemingly needs little introduction to a Western Australian audience. Pat Jacobs' biography nonetheless presents us with a stranger. Neville is best known for the time he spent as Chief Protector of Aborigines, 25 years during which he is credited with shaping — or misshaping — the lives of Western Australia's Aboriginal population. The immense power associated with this role is the basis of Neville's unattractive reputation as tyrant. But the purpose of Jacobs' work is not to rescue Neville the misunderstood from the miasma which envelops his name. Jacobs recreates Neville very much in his own terms, as an immensely hard-working highly principled Englishman driven by ideas of imperial duty and the white man's burden.

Neville came to Western Australia in 1897 and soon embarked on his life's career as bureaucrat. Following a successful period in Immigration, Neville was disappointed to be moved sideways in 1915 into the far from prestigious position of Chief Protector of Aborigines. The area was becoming contentious; but Neville was appointed less because of his abilities than because his predecessor had ruffled feathers and Neville, as a lower-ranking officer, was a cheap replacement. Despite his initial reluctance, duty compelled Neville to give the position his utmost. He rapidly acquired a formidable knowledge of Aboriginal affairs and — more surprisingly perhaps, in view of his reputation — a great respect for Aboriginal culture. Under Neville, state interference in the lives of Aboriginal people increasing immeasurably.

Today we find many of Neville's policies, such as the removal of Aboriginal children from their families, segregation of camps and deliberate encouragement of miscegenation for the purpose of 'breeding out the black', abhorrent. For different reasons they were equally distasteful to many of Neville's contemporaries and Jacobs is at her most effective in charting the forces which worked against Neville as policy-maker. He encountered the opposition of bureaucrats, politicians, powerful northern pastoralists and humanitarians and, as Jacobs shows conclusively, many of the most vicious outcomes of Neville's policies resulted from their obstructionism. Jacobs does not attempt to justify Neville's
actions from the point of view of the devastation his policies wrought on Aboriginal culture, especially in the south-west. However, she is highly successful in presenting Neville as a man of vision and compassion, with an absolute faith in the rightness of the policies he sought to impose on his 'subjects'.

Jacobs has produced a lucid and lively text and *Mister Neville* is a finely-written example of narrative history. Occasionally I found Jacobs' literary devices and allusions overdone. Her metaphor for duty, for example, a concept crucial to our understanding of Neville, is the Neville family home, the Ford rectory set in the soft Cheviot hills of Northumberland. While it is a powerful and apt image, Jacobs overworks it to the point where it becomes intrusive. Similarly Jacobs' frequent ventures into Colonial and Edwardian fiction and poetry and her tendency to draw parallels between the life and experience of Neville and other observers of colonialism are occasionally illuminating but with repetition become irritating, even pointless. George Orwell's *Burmese Days*, for instance, is used to show Orwell's recognition of himself as the focus of the hatred of the colonised Burmese: yet nowhere does Jacobs present evidence of Neville's perception of his own role in these terms. Despite these qualifications, *Mister Neville* is a compelling account of the life of a man whom I had not expected to find so sympathetic.

At one point in the text Jacobs quotes Rhaghavan Iyer: 'it was a despotism all the same, as any system must be in which people are given what is good for them instead of what they want.' The real shortcoming of the book is Jacobs' complete failure to take up such issues. What did Aboriginal people want, and how did they react to Neville's 'despotism'? Abundantly peopled with Neville's associates and family and even with contemporary literary figures Neville apparently never met, there are very few Aboriginal people in the text. Similarly the text is virtually silent concerning the antagonism Neville aroused amongst Aboriginal people. Geoffrey Bolton, who wrote the preface to this book, wrote in 1981 of the history of black-white relations, '(t)he difficulty with using official archives, as with so much colonial history, is that it filters events through the eyes of administrative headquarters.' While Jacobs has gone beyond official sources in writing a biography of some intimacy, it is still history written from the point of view of the victors. Aboriginal writers such as Jack Davis and Sally Morgan have recently presented something of the Aboriginal perception of Neville. But this figure is denied a place in Jacobs' biography. Even as straw man, it should have been there.

Jan Gothard