

## REVIEW ARTICLE

### WHO WERE THE PENSIONERS?

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Among the amateur historians who have contributed so generously to the advancement of the craft in Western Australia, Mr F. H. Broomhall deserves greater recognition than he has so far received for his achievement in collective biography. In 1975 he lodged in the Battye Library a register of all the members of the Enrolled Pensioner Force who served in Western Australia from the coming of the first convicts in 1850 to the final disbandment of the Force in 1880, together with a long introductory essay.\* A supplementary volume in 1976 included a section inadvertently omitted from the original text as well as various addenda and corrigenda, among them information gained from probate records.<sup>1</sup> Together these volumes constitute an important source for the social historian and demographer of nineteenth century Western Australia, and have already been extensively quarried for Volume 3 of the *Dictionary of Western Australians 1829-1914*. They provide the data and primary source references for all material in this article.

Between 1850 and 1868 a total of 1191 pensioner guards came to Western Australia. They were accompanied by 817 women, 735 male children, and 734 female children. According to a return compiled in 1868 by Colonel John Bruce, 581 of the pensioners remained on the force in that year. Another forty-nine reached an age so advanced that their pensions expired, and seven were struck off the list for various forms of misconduct. No fewer than 399 left the colony to settle elsewhere, usually in South Australia or Victoria, although a few anticipated later disgruntled pommies by returning to England. The remaining 155 were dead, eighteen by accident, six by suicide, one shot by a comrade, and the remainder from natural causes. Even although nearly half were removed by death or emigration the pensioners made up a significant element in Western Australia's population, constituting 543 of the 2511 free (non-exconvict) adult males in the colony (21.6 per cent) at the census of March 1870. They must be considered a noteworthy genetic and cultural influence on colonial Western Australia.

\* F. H. Broomhall, *The Veterans: a history of the Enrolled Pensioner Force in Western Australia, 1850-1880* [East Perth: The Author], 1975/76, 2 vols (Battye Library, Perth).

Western Australia was not the first nor the only British colony where pensioner guards were used as a cheap substitute for regular soldiers for the purpose of garrison or police duties. In the aftermath of the Napoleonic wars many veterans accepted recruitment for such duties in preference to civilian life in the British Isles. In 1856 the nominal roll of enrolled pensioners for the British Empire totalled 15,727, including units in Van Diemen's Land, New Zealand, Hudson's Bay, Malta, and smaller posts as far apart as Gambia and the Falkland Islands.<sup>2</sup> After convict transportation to Western Australia was authorised in 1849 it was almost a matter of course that pensioner veterans were enlisted to serve as guards on the voyage out and to act as a reserve force in the colony.

Applicants capable of producing records of good conduct and military service were recruited through the army's pension pay officers. At first they were mainly veterans of colonial wars in Africa, Afghanistan, and the Punjab, with a preponderance of family men between forty and fifty years of age. After 1857 an increasing proportion were veterans of Crimea and the Indian Mutiny. Many of the later recruits were under thirty-five; one of the youngest was Henry Dyson Naylor, who arrived in 1864 at the age of twenty-eight with a face dramatically scarred from the charge of the Light Brigade. The authorities discriminated against applicants who were thought too old or enfeebled for colonial service, and against those with very large families. The official eye was also on the lookout for those who attempted to smuggle distant kinsfolk or friends under pretence of being members of their immediate family.

Successful recruits were assured of free passages for themselves and families, with a guarantee of six months' employment on regular duty at pay ranging from 1s. 3d daily for privates to 1s. 10d. for sergeants (without rations). Each convict ship was normally manned by a platoon of about thirty men, including four non-commissioned officers. (The first convict transport, the *Scindian*, had fifty-five but this was exceptional). On arrival in Western Australia the pensioners would be paid at a daily rate only while on guard duty. Otherwise they would be free to seek employment for wages:

It being considered more advantageous for the Pensioners and their families that they should supply the demand for labor, than attempt settling on land of their own, no grant of land has been promised them; but if they acquire money to purchase it in the interior, there will be no objection to their settling there, even though the distance should prevent them from serving as enrolled Pensioners.<sup>3</sup>

The first arrivals on the *Scindian* were immediately put to work as strikebreakers. J. W. Davey, a prominent Fremantle merchant, hired labourers in mid-1850 at four shillings a day—'to keep them from actual starvation', according to the *Inquirer* at its most sanctimonious.<sup>4</sup> They went on strike for five shillings. The authorities offered Davey a party of pensioners at two shillings and sixpence, and they were engaged, leaving the *Inquirer* to trust that the malcontents would benefit from their lesson.

By this time the British government had changed its mind about pensioner land-owning. Governor Charles Fitzgerald was recommended to establish village settlements with ten-acre blocks on which deserving pensioners could maintain themselves and their families, obtaining the freehold if they remained on the property for seven years. Fitzgerald informed the pensioners of the government's bounty on 5 July 1850, but because of the dearth of suitable land near Perth and Fremantle delayed its implementation. On 23 July the pensioners sent a petition to the authorities urging the governor to make good his promise and requesting that if a landholder died before his seven years were up his widow and family might become grantees in his place.<sup>5</sup> It was drawn up by Andrew Gordon, a corporal of the 40th Regiment with a clerk's skills and

a ready instinct for plucking at his readers' sympathies, and it had its effect. Within a month village settlements were marked out at Mill Point in South Perth and at Freshwater Bay (now Claremont).

Fortune, Corporal Gordon had written in the petition, was a fickle goddess and could not be relied on. The nineteen pioneers at Freshwater Bay had no capital to tide them over the period while their blocks were cleared and brought into production. Their holdings were beyond convenient walking distance to daily employment in Fremantle or Perth, but they needed to earn subsistence. By the autumn of 1851 most of the Freshwater Bay settlers were spending more than half the week away from their holdings. Those who remained at home clearing their blocks sent their wives into the towns to work as washerwomen for two shillings or half-a-crown an hour, but their willingness to live on a woman's earnings was seen as a mark of indolence by those in authority. As for Mill Point, the soil was poor, and most holdings were soon abandoned.<sup>6</sup>

Captain (later Colonel) John Bruce, the officer commanding the pensioner guards took a consistent paternal interest in their welfare. He found that because of the high cost of provisions many of the Freshwater Bay settlers were spending all their time cutting firewood for a living. This should have earned them between three and four shillings a day, but the market for firewood was controlled by two contractors who supplied the government establishments at Fremantle. They paid the woodcutters with provisions at their own valuation, so that the pensioners were almost always working to pay off debts. With mingled feelings Bruce noted that the two contractors were ticket-of-leave men. No doubt it was good to see ex-convicts becoming little capitalists, but Bruce wrote: 'It is with deep regret that I see the pensioners of Freshwater Bay surpassed by them in intelligence and enterprise . . .'<sup>7</sup> He grubstaked both settlements to purchase flat-bottomed boats for marketing their produce, but the Mill Point experiment failed because the marine who was supposed to instruct his fellows in handling the boat absconded in order to take a job at York. The Freshwater Bay men built up a promising business freighting limestone to Fremantle, but quarrelled and broke up the partnership when it was found that one of their number was using their credit to run up debts with the publicans. Bruce had to admit that men with years of service in the army were less likely to develop good business habits than the better class of ex-convicts.

In any case, he wrote, 'the élite of the pensioners, as regards education and good sense, are employed in situations of trust in the convict establishment, police force, and commissariat department . . .'<sup>8</sup> A return of June 1851 showed that of the first three shiploads of pensioners, totalling 110 men, fifty were employed on guard duty, as warders, or as officers in road gangs and survey parties. Only ten practised a trade.<sup>9</sup> Another forty were labourers, servants, or woodcutters. Of the remaining ten, three were ill and the other seven 'allege that they merely work on the land — these are indolent men who depend chiefly on their wives' earnings . . .'<sup>10</sup> These proportions remained fairly constant as the number of pensioners grew. The implication was clear. If they were to break free of the pinched opportunities of the unskilled labourer, the pensioners for the most part would need to find government jobs.

Bruce was an unabashed urger for preference for ex-servicemen. He was scandalised when one of his pensioners fell foul of the master and servant regulations and was sent to prison at the request of his employer;<sup>11</sup> but if his men were not to be subjected to the whims of the John Henry Mongers of the colony they must be enabled to break out of the unskilled labourer class. He badgered the commissariat because its officers sometimes employed ex-convicts as a means to rehabilitation, and wrote angrily:

. . . it has proved, in many instances, by far a more gainful exploit to filch a purse in Fleet Street than to spike a cannon upon the Sutlej . . . and . . . it were a better speculation, barring honesty and honor, to have committed a burglary in Soho than to have stormed an entrenchment before Sebastopol.<sup>12</sup>

In 1864 he persuaded the War Office to instruct the Western Australian authorities that pensioners should have preference for vacancies in the commissariat. A considerable number of pensioners and their sons were recruited into the police force, although at first the authorities were reluctant to admit Catholics because of the rancorous feuds in that denomination in the early 1850s. To Bruce these considerations were irrelevant. The important point was that a man should be a good soldier.

Bruce took pride in the excellence of their discipline. It was never necessary to sentence a pensioner to flogging, imprisonment, or punishment drill. Some succumbed to the colonial weakness, but Bruce claimed: 'I never allow a case of drunkenness to pass unnoticed'.<sup>13</sup> The penalty for a first offence was suspension for six months and for a second offence dismissal, and Bruce believed these measures worked well. He may have glossed over reality. In October 1851 when the pensioners from the *Minden* arrived in Perth they were greeted by a drum and fife band playing 'See the conquering heroes come', and the welcome went to their heads. Corporal John Gorman recorded in his diary:

The men are nearly all drinking at the Freemason's Tavern and the scenes that took place in our Dormitory beggars description, fighting, singing, Vomiting etc. Parade tomorrow moring at ½ past 5 o'clock . . .

'The men are half stupefied for parade . . .' he wrote next morning, but the next night saw more dissipation.<sup>14</sup>

Against such temptations Bruce fostered habits of thrift. In 1855 he promoted the formation of a Pensioners' Benevolent Society, which by 1863 possessed a capital of £1100. Members paid an entrance fee of fifteen shillings and a monthly subscription of a shilling. In return they could claim sick relief to a maximum of £7 10s. over a period of six months. If a man was widowed he would be granted £5; if he died leaving a widow she would receive £7 immediately and £1 a year subsequently. In addition subscribers of eighteen months' standing could secure loans at five per cent for the purchase of raw materials or tools of trade, or stock or implements for farming—though in no circumstances for the purchase of consumer goods.<sup>15</sup> This fund gave the pensioners access to credit on a scale unavailable to other members of the artisan and labouring class, at least until the formation of the Perth Building Society in 1862.

A minority of pensioners benefited from government schemes to settle them on the land. Contrary to Bruce's hope the men of education did least well. John Kirwan, steward and clerk to the Convict Establishment, was a sergeant who won high praise from the magistrates for his activity and intelligence, and his land grant at Freshwater Bay threw so well that by 1853 he became the first of the pensioners to employ ticket-of-leave men on his property. But at the end of the year he absconded from the colony and forfeited his land, lured by the prospects of the Victorian goldrush. Andrew Gordon, who so movingly argued for the right of old soldiers to provide for their wives and families, went off to New South Wales in 1857, leaving his own wife and family to government charity. Yet eleven of the nineteen grantees at Freshwater Bay stuck it out for seven years to receive their freeholds, and some such as John Atkinson were still noted for an excellent orchard of fig-trees and vines as late as the 1870s. Between 1852 and 1854 a settlement of pensioners on one-acre lots was established at North Fre-

mantle, where access to jobs was easier; and by October 1854 Bruce was exclaiming at the transformation of a wilderness of brushwood, reeds, and seafowl into fields of vegetables and barley, with 'eighteen neat cottages surrounded with cultivation' and no fewer than forty head of cattle.<sup>16</sup> Unfortunately the experiment was not repeated. It was not until 1868 that a further bloc grant of rural land was made to a group of pensioner guards, and then about thirty were established at the Greenough flats.

Whether they took government positions or went on the land, the pensioner guards were usually regarded as a powerful force for respectability in the convict colony. 'The Pensioner Force under Lt. Colonel Bruce form an important element in the population of this Colony', wrote Governor Kennedy in 1856, 'and is calculated to exercise a lasting influence on the popular character of the colony'.<sup>17</sup> Troublemakers were few. Even Peter McQuade, who was temporarily demoted from sergeant for challenging the surgeon of the *Robert Small* over the adequacy of the rations, and who was later a ringleader in December 1853 in getting up a pensioners' petition protesting against the high cost of provisions, survived to become a trusted and conformist citizen of York. For the most part the pensioners were dutiful subscribers to patriotic funds and enthusiastic participants in ceremonial occasions such as royal visits and anniversaries. Bruce calculated that not more than two per cent had become at any time burdensome on the community; 'consequently they contrasted most favorably with every other class of immigrant'.<sup>18</sup>

They seldom sank into the ranks of the indigent poor; but few of the pensioners appear to have found Western Australia a field for the rapid social advancement of their families. The most successful of the second generation was George Throssell, son of one of the *Scindian* pensioners, who prospered to become the lion of Northam, a member of parliament 1890-1904 and 1907-10, a successful minister for lands and briefly premier.<sup>19</sup> Since his father died in 1855, when he was fifteen, Throssell's career owed nothing to his parent's achievements as a pensioner guard. He belongs rather to the ranks of the colonial orphans who became Dick Whittingtons, together with Walter Padbury. More characteristic of the pensioners' sons was the only other parliamentarian to emerge from their ranks, Patrick Stone. Son of one of the Greenough pensioners, Stone was the local MLA 1901-04 and 1905-08, as well as losing several more elections between 1891 and 1926. A produce merchant and farmer of modest means, he was a Catholic populist who apparently lacked the sophistication to be taken quite seriously as a legislator; but he became something of a dynast as two of his daughters married Labor politicians, J. C. Willcock and M. J. Kennedy. A third who might have risen in public life was William Finlay, son of a *Scindian* pensioner. He became a sub-inspector of police and then mayor of Albany but died prematurely in 1886. At least one family entered the ranks of the squatters. Private Bernard Fitzpatrick, farrier from the 6th Dragoons and by 1851 a well regarded policeman, was the father of John Fitzpatrick who, after managing for the Brockman family, pioneered Dairy Creek station in the Gascoyne district in 1878. Together with Dalgety Downs the property was still in his family's hands in 1913 together with a handsome town residence in Subiaco.<sup>20</sup>

Compared with the ruck of pensioner families who stayed in the ranks of Western Australia's working-class and artisans, such success stories are too few to permit generalisations. In any case each of them can be matched with a similar case of social mobility in ex-convicts and their families. In Northam's neighbour Toodyay the leading capitalist was the ex-convict Daniel Connor, who, if he could not emulate Throssell in entering the legislature, sent a son and a son-in-law into the Legislative Assembly, and died wealthier than Throssell.<sup>21</sup> The Fitzpatricks' neighbour in the

Gascoyne was William Hatch of Lyons River—whose father was an Irish sheep-stealer transported in 1851. The elder Hatch married on release, worked as a gardener, became a manager for Walter Padbury, and died in 1908 with 700 acres of freehold and 3000 acres of leasehold on the Moore River.<sup>22</sup> No doubt the families of ex-convicts were more likely to lapse below the poverty line than the families of pensioners. They did not enjoy so many support systems. But among the colony's achievers those of convict origin figure at least as prominently as those of pensioner origin.

Governor Kennedy was probably right in suggesting that the pensioners' legacy to Western Australia would mainly be their moral influence. They provided an example of conformity and loyalty which evoked official approval and served as a model for other members of the working class who aspired to respectability—including some of the ex-convicts. Accustomed to obey orders, practical and resourceful if perhaps a little lacking in initiative, appreciative that on the whole Western Australia provided opportunities less unattractive than the English workhouse, the old soldiers of the pensioner guards may well have contributed to the strength of conservative traditions in Western Australia. Broomhall's data on these veterans offer a valuable basis for a deeper exploration of this element in the making of the Western Australian community. The pioneers were not *all* gentry and convicts.

## REFERENCES

1. Battye Library Q355.31.
2. C.O. 18, Vol. 56, p. 306.
3. *Perth Gazette*, 22 March 1850.
4. *Inquirer*, 19 June 1850.
5. [*Convict System*] A collection of miscellaneous official documents 1850-1865, 9 vols, HMSO: vol. 5, p. 224. Gordon to Fitzgerald, 23 July 1850; Henderson to Colonial Secretary, 24 July 1850.
6. F. K. Crowley, *Western Suburb: the History of South Perth, Western Australia*, Perth 1962, chs 1 and 2.
7. [*Convict System*] vol. 6, p. 205. Captain J. Bruce to Secretary at War, 14 June 1852.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 206.
9. Two were shoemakers. There were also one saddler, one tailor, one nailmaker, one farrier, one sawyer, one gardener, one painter, and one musician.
10. CSO 221: return of 11 June 1851.
11. CSO 221: Bruce to Fitzgerald, 14 April 1851.
12. Bruce to Secretary of State for Colonies, 23 May 1864; also Secretary of State to Governor Hampton, 24 September 1864 (C.O. 18/140).
13. CSO 221: Bruce to Secretary at War, 11 June 1851.
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15. C.O. 18, Vol. 135. Memorandum of Pensioners Benevolent Fund (by Bruce), 15 August 1863.
16. CSO 33: Bruce to Colonial Secretary, 19 October 1854.
17. C.O. 18, Vol. 95. Governor Kennedy to Secretary of State for Colonies, 31 August 1856.
18. C.O. 18, Vol. 159, p. 164.
19. D. S. Garden, *Northam: an Avon Valley History*, Melbourne 1979, pp. 59-62.
20. J. S. Battye, *Cyclopaedia of Western Australia*, vol. 2, Adelaide 1913, pp. 221-6.
21. R. Erickson, *Old Toodyay and Newcastle*, Toodyay 1974 *passim*.
22. J. S. Battye, *Cyclopaedia*, pp. 226-7; R. Erickson (ed.), *Dictionary of Western Australians 1829-1914*, Nedlands 1979, vols 2 and 3: s.v. 'Hatch'.