



Northern  
Territory  
Government

DEPARTMENT OF  
NATURAL RESOURCES, ENVIRONMENT, THE ARTS AND SPORT

# Kahlin Compound

Background Historical Information



Prepared by the Heritage Branch, November 2009

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Cover Photo: Painted Aboriginal men dancing at a corroboree at Kahlin Compound (Kahlin Collection, NT Library)

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## 1. Introduction

This historical information was compiled in May 2007 as part of a heritage assessment report prepared on the Kahlin Compound for the Heritage Advisory Council, as per the requirements under the *Heritage Conservation Act*.

## 2. Location

The Kahlin Compound was situated on land now comprising Lot 6364 Town of Darwin. Lot 6364 is located on Lambell Terrace, Larrakeyah (See location map below).



## 3. Historical Overview

### 3.1 Early Governance of Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory

The settlement of Darwin in 1869 and subsequent expansion of the pastoral and mining industries across the Northern Territory displaced many Aboriginal people physically, culturally and socially. This physical, cultural and social displacement of Aboriginal people by European settlers often gave rise to conflict and violence.

Although Governments of the time appointed protectors of Aborigines, the police were largely responsible for controlling the violence and abuses, usually in preference to non-Indigenous parties. (HREOC 2003). Remoteness of many settlements made the protection of Aboriginal people particularly difficult for a police force spread thin across the vast lands of the Northern Territory.

Aboriginal people were largely forced to either flee from the expanding non-Indigenous settlements and associated conflicts or come into the settlements to work and set up camps on their fringes. The congregation of Aboriginal

people at settlements across the Northern Territory often resulted in abuse and exploitation, especially that of Aboriginal women by non-Indigenous men. These problems were perhaps most acute where the displacement of Aboriginal people was greatest, near the Northern Territory's larger settlements such as Darwin and Pine Creek. One result of this abuse was rise in the number of mixed descent children that came to be known as 'half castes'.

When the Constitution of the Commonwealth of Australia was enacted in 1901 the rationale towards Aboriginal people was based on the perception the Aborigines were a dying race and would simply disappear (Whitlam 1997). The Constitution also alleviated the Commonwealth of responsibility and effectively allowed them to wash their hands of Aboriginal Affairs. At this time the lands of the Northern Territory, and its largely Aboriginal population, were still in control of South Australia.

When the Commonwealth took over control of the Northern Territory from South Australia in 1911, the Commonwealth Parliament also obtained undivided power over the Territory and Aboriginal people. This handover marked the beginning of formalised control and institutionalising of Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory.

*The Northern Territory Aborigines Act 1910 established the Northern Territory Aborigines Department to provide, where possible, for the custody, maintenance and education of the children of Aborigines. Under this Act the Chief Protector was appointed the legal guardian of every Aboriginal and every half-caste child up to the age of 18 years, whether or not the child had parents or other living relatives. The Chief Protector was also given power to confine any Aboriginal or half-caste to a reserve or Aboriginal institution.*

*Just a few weeks after the passage of the 1910 Act the Commonwealth took control of the Territory and enacted the Northern Territory Aborigines Ordinance 1911. The Chief Protector was further empowered to assume the care, custody or control of any Aboriginal or half caste if in his opinion it is necessary or desirable in the interests of the Aboriginal or half caste for him to do so. These powers were retained until 1957 (HREOC 2003:2,3).*

On face value the *Aboriginal Ordinance 1911* was designed to protect Aboriginals from exploitation. However, whatever protection was achieved through this ordinance also entailed the denial of rights, making Aborigines an institutionalised and administered people subject to the direction and control of officials.

The first Northern Territory Report of the Administrator for the year 1912 makes considerable mention about the 'Aborigines'. The Administrator J.A. Gilruth (NTRA 1912:12) reported that "the difficult problem of the control, utilization and advancement of the largest portion of our population – the aborigines – has received during the past year the special attention of the greatest authority on the subject, Professor Baldwin Spencer, of the Melbourne University". Gilruth goes on to report that Spencer was appointed a

Special Commissioner and Chief Protector of the Aborigines to the Aborigines Department. Spencer's 'credentials' for the job were largely attained through numerous trips to Alice Springs in 1894, 1896 and Borroloola in 1901-1902 which resulted in publication of acclaimed papers.

Spencer was in the job for less than a year but he developed policies regarding Aboriginal people that would continue to influence their treatment for decades to come. Although Spencer's views on Aboriginals were mechanistic and influenced by late nineteenth century evolutionary theory, his stern and paternalistic welfare policies were far in advance of government or popular opinion (Carment, Maynard and Powell 1990:270).

### **3.2 The history of Kahlin Compound and Government policy**

The Kahlin Compound was established in Darwin in 1912 in accordance with the policy developed by Spencer, Special Commissioner and Chief Protector of the Aborigines to the Aborigines Department. Spencer divided Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory into four groups based on their distribution: those living in and around towns; those living on land where they have been to a certain extent in contact with early settlers; those living on large pastoral areas; and those living on wild, unoccupied lands of the Territory (NTRA 1912:42). From a point of view of 'dealing' with Aboriginal people however, Spencer divided them into two main groups: those living in and about townships, and employed in the latter; and those living more or less in their wild state (NTRA 1912:48).

The solution for Spencer in both situations was the establishment of reserves that would protect Aboriginal people from exploitation, abuse and the trappings of the new settlers. These reserves were certainly not intended to be the same. To preserve those Aborigines 'living in their wild state' it was recommended that large reserves be established. These reserves should contain sufficient natural resources where different groups might still maintain some geographic remoteness and land with potential for future agriculture or pastoralism development that might also enable the betterment of Aboriginal people. Spencer also considered that no 'half-caste' children should be allowed to remain within these native reserves and should be withdrawn for placement on stations, within compounds or half-caste homes.

In contrast Aboriginal people living in and about the Darwin township, many of whom were 'half-castes', were institutionalised in a way that did not respect cultural differences and would force them to accept the European way of life, given in Spencer's view, "that these natives had so completely lost their old customs" (NTRA 1912:48). Spencer was of the view that 'half-castes' should be placed on reserves with the natives. Spencer envisaged that the compound would be self sufficient, provide schooling, housing for each Aboriginal family with an attached vegetable garden and also train people in domestic duties for European service. Minimal wages would be paid to those engaged in such service. The whole compound was to be fenced with access for Aboriginals and Departmental officials only.



**Figure 2:** Children at the Kahlin Compound fence (Kahlin Collection, NT Library, date unknown)

Powell (1996:141-142) neatly summarises the arrival of Spencer and establishment of the Kahlin Compound.

*“Like many an anthropologist, Spencer showed a great deal more sympathy for traditional blacks than town dwellers. As soon as he reached Darwin in January 1912 he inspected the camps of the Larakia and the neighbouring Wagait at Lameroo beach, just below the town centre. ‘The filth and dirt were simply indescribable’ he wrote, and moved the inhabitants to a new camp at Kahlin Beach, a little further from the town and under the control of protector R MacDonald. ‘Genuine wild natives would be miserable away from their own country, but in the case of a heterogenous crowd, such is now gathered together in Darwin, there was no need to pay any heed to this aspect of the matter. They have all long since got beyond any traditional feeling’, Spencer noted casually as he crammed together Larakia, Wagait and any other tribal groups who happened to be in the vicinity. They had not got beyond traditional feeling. ‘It has been a difficult matter to induce the different tribes to amalgamate and fraternise’, complained the next Chief Protector, W.G.Stretton, in 1913; and the Kahlin Compound continued to be a major source of intertribal friction and ever-strengthening well intentioned official repression (Powell 1996:141-142).*

Kahlin was never solely intended to be an institution for ‘half-castes’. However by nature of its location in Darwin it became increasingly populated by people of mixed descent. Indeed Spencer had argued that the ‘compounds’ in town areas should be established to contain all Aboriginal people. By 1909 the ‘half-caste’ population of the Northern Territory was estimated at 200 of whom one third were females of child-bearing age. Darwin's European population

then numbered about 300 (HREOC 2003: 2-3). Nearly two decades later the Bleakly Report of 1927 estimated the 'half caste' population of the Territory to be 8000, or 38% of the 21,000 Aboriginal population.

Within the Northern Territory Administrators Report for 1913, Gilruth stated that "the usefulness of the Aboriginal Compound at Darwin is becoming more apparent, while the establishment of the school for half-castes and natives within the compound, and their separation from the white children, has proved very beneficial to the children of both races" (NTRA 1913:8). W.G. Stretton, Chief Protector of Aborigines reported that the school was opened on 19<sup>th</sup> October 1913 and was being attended by 16 'half-caste' and 9 'full-blood' children (NTRA 1913:32). Stretton (NTRA 1913:37) also provides a detailed account of Kahlin for 1913:

*The Compound comprises about 13 acres.....The compound has a boundary fence consisting of posts of local timber and barb wire.*

*Cultivation consists of about fifty mango trees in full bearing, a small banana plantation and a few lemon trees. The vegetable garden was carried on during a portion of the year, the products of which were consumed by the inmates of the compound.*

*There are now sixteen bark huts, a boys' dormitory, girls' dormitory, kitchen, laundry, office, storeroom, coach-house and fodder room, a fowl house, and some old dilapidated buildings in the gardens. ....*

*At 31<sup>st</sup> December last [1913] there were seventy-six inhabitants of the compound; all these, with the exception of the Superintendent, were aboriginals or half-castes.*

In 1914 Stretton retired in his role as Chief Protector of Aborigines with the statutory duties deferring to the Government Secretary (NTRA 1913:8). Significantly for the 'status-quo' treatment of Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory, a full time Chief Protector would not be appointed again until the appointment of Dr Cecil Cook in 1927 (HREOC 2003:6).

In 1918 a new comprehensive Aboriginal Ordinance intensified the existing law's protectionist and discriminatory provisions (Summers 2000:14-15). Aborigines were subject to extraordinary restrictions administered by the Chief Protector of Aborigines who was given extraordinary powers. Over the next two decades officials were vested with ever increasing discretionary powers over Aboriginal people in the name of greater protection and through subsequent amendment to the Aboriginal Ordinance (Summers 2000:17).



**Figure 3:** Aerial view of the Kahlin Compound (four diagonal lines of small huts in the bottom left of the picture) (circa 1920s) (John Oxley Collection, NT Library)



**Figure 4:** View of Kahlin Compound buildings with sea in background (circa 1920s) (Roy Edwards Collection, NT Library)



**Figure 5:** Huts at Kahlin Compound (circa 1930s) (Marella Collection, NT Library).

The 2003 Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission Report 'Bringing them Home' describes the extent of these powers:

*Aboriginal females were under the total control of the Chief protector from the moment they were born until they died unless married and living with a husband 'who is substantially of European origin'. They could be taken from their families at any age and placed in an institution. They could be sent out to work at a young age and never receive wages. They had no right of guardianship over their own children who could be similarly taken from them. Male Aborigines fared little better except that they could be released from guardianship at 18.*

*During the 1920s the pace of forcible removals increased, leading to severe overcrowding in Kahlin Compound and The Bungalow. The Methodist Missionary Society indicated it was prepared to take the mixed descent children from the Kahlin Compound, where they still had some contact with their family, to its mission on Goulburn Island.*

*This proposal threatened the availability of cheap domestic labour from the Compound and was opposed by Darwin residents. To accommodate employers a government house just outside the Compound was taken over in 1924 for the girls and the younger boys and became known as the Half-Caste Home. Compound families were thereby separated (HREOC 2003:4).*

In 1927 the Commonwealth commissioned Queensland Chief Protector of Aboriginals, J.W. Bleakley, to conduct an enquiry into the conditions of Aboriginals in the Northern Territory. The report found that Aboriginal people

were not being paid wages, their living conditions were appalling, Aboriginal children were not being schooled and the institutions run by the government were badly situated, inadequately financed and insufficiently supervised. Bleakley, however, was impressed with the work of the missions and proposed that all illegitimate 'half-castes' under the age of 16 years be placed in government-subsidised mission homes for education and vocational training. He proposed that children be sent to different mission institutions according to their proportion of 'European blood' (HREOC 2003:5-6).

**Figure 6 (right):**  
Aboriginal children  
with clergy man at  
Sunday school,  
Kahlin Compound  
1921 (Peter Spillett  
Collection, NT  
Library)



In 1927 Dr Cecil Cook was appointed the Chief Protector of Aborigines in the Northern Territory. With Cook's appointment Aboriginal people within the Kahlin Compound found themselves under tight control. Cook even censored their films – they were not to see any film which tended to lower their respect for the white man; an odd provision indeed, when white men were trying daily to prostitute their women (Powell 1996:161).

**Figure 7 (right):**  
Women and children  
at Kahlin Compound,  
circa 1930s (Marella  
Collection, NT Library)





**Figure 8 (left):**  
Aboriginal group at  
Kahlin Compound,  
circa 1930s (Marella  
Collection, NT Library)

**Figure 9 (right):**  
Group of orderly 'half-  
caste' Aboriginal  
children at the Kahlin  
Compound,  
circa 1920s. (John  
Oxley Collection, NT  
Library)



Cook was preoccupied with the continuing increase in the numbers of mixed descent children, foreseeing a danger that half-castes would become a numerically preponderant under-class, in conflict with the white population of the north. Cook's solution to this was to encourage biological assimilation or the absorption of people of mixed descent (HREOC 2003: 6). An important impetus for the removal of children in the Northern Territory was a fear that the white population could be over run by the Aboriginal people of mixed descent, who may present a future threat to the state (Smith 2004: 80). Cook's fear was not totally without basis given that at the time there were around five white men in the Territory for every white woman. Cook expressed the Territory's dilemma in the following terms:

*If aborigines are protected physically and morally, before long there will be in the Northern Territory, a black race, already numbering around 19,000 and multiplying at a rate far in excess of*

*that of the whites. If we leave them alone, they will die, and we shall have no problem, apart from dealing with those pangs of conscience which must attend the passing of a neglected race. If, on the other hand, we protect them with the elaborate measures of protection which every conscientious protector would adopt, we shall raise another problem which may become a serious one from a national viewpoint, for we shall have in the Northern Territory...a large black population which may drive out the white.*

*The policy of the Commonwealth is to do everything possible to convert the half-caste into a white citizen...My view is that unless the black population is speedily absorbed into the white, the process will soon be reversed, and in 50 years, or a little latter, the white population of Northern Territory will be absorbed into the black (in Smith 2004: 81).*

The assimilation of half-castes and conversion to white citizens would solve two problems for the Government: not only would it neutralise the potential threat of large populations of people with Aboriginal values and allegiances, it increased the number of people with skills, habits and cultural values needed for a fast developing nation (Smith 2004: 82). The prevailing belief of the time was that the forcible removal of a child of mixed descent was a humanitarian act. This was based on the assumption that Aboriginal people had a similar view towards people of mixed descent as Europeans and would reject these individuals who would then become social outcasts. It was also widely believed by the Australian public that the forcible removal of children was generally to rescue them from abject conditions rather than as part of any official Government policy (Smith 2004: 84). The frequency of these removals and subsequent institutionalisation reinforced the notion that most Aboriginal people lived in the abject conditions and were therefore unable to provide a suitable European standard of living to raise children. Cook described the situation (HREOC 2003:6):

*Children are removed from the evil influence of the aboriginal camp with its lack of moral training and its risk of serious organic infectious disease. They are properly fed, clothed and educated as white children, they are subjected to constant medical supervision and in receipt of domestic and vocational training.*

In contrast to the beliefs that these children would be afforded better conditions was the Bleakley report finding that living conditions in institutions like Kahlin were appalling. By the early 1930s there were seven missions operating in the Northern Territory, mostly in the north. Although the 1927 Bleakley report had recommended these missions be given responsibility for Aboriginal children the Government provided little funding or support to overcome the similarly appalling conditions where disease was widespread. The harsh economic years of the Australian depression (1929-1932) did little to ensure adequate Government funding to redress the appalling conditions in either Government institutions or the missions.

Cook was unsupportive of the missions pointing to the appalling conditions as reason. Underlying these criticisms was Cook's belief in genetic assimilation and breeding out. The missions were more concerned with education and protection which Cook perceived as a threat to his belief and aim of assimilation.

In the 1936 Administrators Report for the Northern Territory, Chief Protector of Aboriginals Cook reported that "the present site [Kahlin] is no longer suitable for a Native Compound, not only because it is, being so obsolete in structure, an eyesore, but because the isolation necessary for the efficient control of inmates no longer exists" (NTRA 1936:14). The 1937 Administrators Report reported the acquisition of a 369 acre property in Ludmilla which was deemed "a more suitable neighbourhood" (NTRA 1937:27). Cook goes on to report the considerable work that had already been undertaken on the property by the half-castes and commissioning of substantial new works.

In 1937 John McEwan was appointed as the new federal Minister responsible for the Indigenous affairs. McEwan visited Government institutions in the Northern Territory and was appalled at the conditions commented that there were "many stock breeders who would not dream of crowding their stock in the way that these half-caste children are huddled" (HREOC 2003:9).

In May of 1938 the last of the inmates from Kahlin were moved to the new Bagot Aboriginal Reserve. Immediately after their transfer all buildings which previously housed Aboriginals at Kahlin Compound were demolished (NTRA 1938: 24).

In 1939 McEwan announced his 'New Deal' based on greater government control over people of mixed descent. Cook's policy of biological absorption was displaced by economic and social assimilation. Education of 'half-castes' to the 'full white standard' received more attention. Children of mixed descent were to be removed to government institutions where 'up to a certain age, the children of both sexes would be given the care necessary for young children and certain elementary education'.

The transfer of all Aboriginals, both 'full-blood' and 'half-caste' to Bagot, had however angered McEwan. McEwan viewed this as the very opposite of what had been agreed upon as proper care of the half-caste people, the idea being to raise their status by keeping them away from the Aborigines (HREOC 2003:9-10).

### **3.3 After the Kahlin Compound.**

Following the closure of Kahlin Compound in 1938, the area housed defence force personnel until 1941. In 1941-42 a new hospital for Darwin was constructed on the site. These buildings would later be used for teaching and student accommodation purposes of the Northern Territory University. All of these buildings were subsequently demolished.

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