Who’s Photo - Geyer or Bonney?

Under research progress above I noted that not a lot has happened in the past year due to other commitments. However, in December/January there was an interesting flurry of correspondence in relation to a photograph. As part of my ongoing enquires, I had come across a book by Jeanette Hope and Robert Lindsay on the Aboriginal photographs of Frederic Bonney. While looking at the material I recognised one photo as being in the collection of images held by the Hay Historical Society from glass plate negatives that belonged to Henry Geyer.

Ten of the fifteen images from the Geyer collection of fifteen photographs were reproduced in earlier newsletters. Being aware of the cultural sensitivity relating to Aboriginal photos, only one of Aborigines was reproduced at that time (the other’s not used are Hay street scenes). The photo in question (seen below) was not reproduced then – or perhaps this connection might have been made sooner.

To give some background; Jeanette is a well known historian in Darling-Murray matters, and I first ran across her via the NSW-WEST mailing list soon after starting this project. Robert, a Menindee resident, wrote a book on the (then) known photographs of Frederic Bonney in 1983. They published the new book on Bonney in 2010 (see books on page 9 for details).

Frederic Bonney was an Englishman from Staffordshire who arrived in Melbourne in 1865. He joined his brother Edward, who held runs on the Paroo river that would become Momba Station. He left to return to England by a circuitous route in 1881. Two sets of Australian photographs attributed to Bonney survive. The Mitchell collection was donated to the Anthropological Society of Australasia.

Bonney’s notes (as transcribed by Robert Lindsay) identify the people in the photo as: Back (L to R) Jeannie, Billy, Penchey Martin, Ogle-eyed Johnny, Hughey, Hughey’s woman, Old Mary, and Nora. Front (L to R) Jenny (noted as Culty Tommy’s woman), unnamed child, Momba Mary, Old Peter, Polly, Panga (standing boy), Wonko Mary, and Jenny (noted later as George’s woman). The image shows an interesting mix of traditional and European in the clothing. Some of the women wear the lime ‘mourning cap’ called Kopi. Three of the men hold spears (and Billy looks to also, but it may possibly have moved during the exposure).
by BONNEY’s sister after his death in 1921, and is now held in the NSW State library. The ‘Butter Album’, named for one time owner Dr John Kerr BUTTER, was donated to the National Library in 2003 by the estate of the subsequent owner.

The photo in question appeared in both collections. The original print in the Mitchell collection has since disappeared – but BONNEY’s annotations were recorded by Robert LINDSAY in preparing his 1983 book. The Butter Album print is listed in the NLA catalogue as PIC/8131/54. The image can be found in the NLA online collection at http://nla.gov.au/nla.pic-an24474368.

So who made the photograph? The Mitchell collection prints were attributed to BONNEY as a number of them bore annotations made by him. The Butter Album as a whole is not attributed, although some of the pictures in it can be. BUTTER and BONNEY lived within a short distance in England, and that would appear to be how BUTTER came to possess the Momba photographs. The Butter Album subject matter is wide ranging, with only ten pages featuring images from Momba and the surrounding area. These have been taken at different times, with dates attributed from 1865.

We do know the Butter Album images are by various photographers. The 1865 image is annotated in BONNEY’s hand to “Pickering Travelling Photographer”, thought to be Charles Percy PICKERING. BONNEY also had contact with William Drayton THROWER, a Wilcannia school teacher who set up a photography studio there in the 1870s. So did BONNEY know Henry GEYER too?

We can follow Henry and his family’s travels in the area by the trail of births. Daughter Mary Catherine was registered in Echuca in 1864, Victoria Nettley was named for her birth on Netley station in 1866, and son Harty’s birth in Wilcannia was registered in Bourke in 1868. We also know Henry was settled in Hay by late 1869, where most of his known photography was conducted.

HOPE and LINDSAY have dated the photo to around 1870 based on details of people in the image. In particular the boy Panga is believed to have been born around 1863 (dying aged approximately 50 years in 1913). Given possible variations in Panga’s dates, and consulting with a kindergarten teacher (Louise) on an approximate age for the boy based on his physical appearance, the date could be several years earlier. So GEYER and BONNEY were certainly close geographically and temporally – and the connection of the photographic prints and plate would suggest they did have contact. But it doesn’t answer who made the photo. However, the fact that the plate remained in GEYER’s possession would suggest that it was him.

The provenance of the negative plate is clear. As noted in newsletter No.5, the plates were handed down within the GEYER family after they moved to Western Australia. The last family (cont. page 8)

As reported earlier in the newsletter, ROGERS descendant Bishop Les TOMLINSON has left his role as Vicar-General of Melbourne and taken up a new position as Bishop of Sandhurst. Based in Bendigo, it seems he’s moving closer to home. Here’s a report on the Bishop from the Sunraysia Daily in February of this year.