

Royal Western Australian Historical Society's
Annual Pioneers Memorial Service
on Sunday 1st June 1986 at St Bartholomews Chapel, East Perth Cemeteries,

Commemorating Tommy Dower

Citation by Professor Geoffrey Bolton

Ladies and Gentleman, I guess this is a rather remarkable Foundation Day weekend, first of all because the weather is going to be fine for all three days!

Secondly because we can enjoy the fine rain without feeling guilty about it because of good opening rains beforehand. About 12 years since we've had a season like that.

In some ways I feel almost a little untimely in being asked to come and speak to you today about the pioneer we have chosen to honour which is Tommy Dower. Because ten years ago there would have been only a few facts known about Tommy Dower's life and there would have been the necessity to spin them out with a certain amount of imagination and ten years later with luck there will be a lot more known about Tommy Dower and about other 19th century aborigines who lived in Western Australia because there is a great deal of very fine research going on, starting out of that Dictionary of Western Australians Rica Erickson has done so much to move along.

But the volume in preparation about the aboriginal population of the 19th century and scholars such as Lois Tilbrook, Neville Breen and Sylvia Hallam and many others have been very carefully piecing together all the evidence so that we'll know much more about our own aboriginal population, much more about the origins of today's aborigines and much more about the mixture of people that made up the foundation of this state than anyone has known before and it will be a great deal better than anything accepted in any of the other Australian states.

When we have this celebration in 1996 I hope that not only will it be possible to talk about Tommy Dower again, but by that time there may be a choice of several aboriginal historians to give this Address. I am not sorry to have the opportunity of speaking to you about Tommy Dower this afternoon because I have known about him for a very long time. The first piece of research which I ever set my hand to was a study of the career of Alexander Forrest and Tommy Dower accompanied Alexander Forrest on that great expedition to the Kimberley's in 1879. In that way found his way into the history books, even at a time when we weren't taking as much notice of the aborigines as we should have.

Where to begin. By the time that Tommy Dower rode out on that expedition with Forrest and his companions in 1879 he was already a mature man, probably 40 to 45, certainly aborigines that went with the Forrest's were not youngsters, they were in their 30's & 40's, experienced, the sort of people that other aborigines would meet and respect and take seriously. As far as we can tell Tommy Dower was one of the Murray River people, in fact Jessie Hammond, that wise old pioneer who more than most pioneers knew about the aborigines, always reckoned Tommy Dower was one of Winjan's sons. Winjan of course was that patriarch who kept his people together during the first generation of European settlement and was respected as one who gave leadership to the aborigines of the large part of the south-west. As Tommy Dower in his turn came to be seen as the leader of the aborigines of the area between Perth and the Murray, it may be that they were father and son, even if biologically that wasn't the case, metaphorically Dower was kind of the son of Winjan, the person who in fairly difficult circumstances took the lead in holding his community together.

They in fact belong to the first generation of aboriginal Australians who grew up and spent their entire life co-existing with the fact that the white people had come to stay, and whether in fact there would be room in this community for all people that had arrived so that all could find themselves some opportunity of fulfilling their own natures. Now you have seen the account of Dower in the Western Mail for 1895 and that suggests that he was about 60 years of age. Well, that's guesswork, he might have been 50, and he might have been a bit more. But if as seems likely he was one of the Murray River people, then he was born at a particularly critical time for his people. It had been in 1834, 60 years before his death, that had occurred that grim and bloody spring morning, when Captain Stirling and Captain Roe and Mr. Thomas Peel and a number of soldiers, had ridden out from their camp and encountered resistance from the local aborigines and had fought that conflict that has come to be known in our histories as the Battle of Pinjarra. That battle broke the hold that the Murray River aborigines held over their country, it meant that the Murray was now open to white settlement; it meant that the remaining aborigines in that vicinity had the difficult task of regrouping

and recovering themselves to maintain some sense of their own identity. If Dower was born around that time or a few years afterwards, he would have grown up with that background as part of the stories he was told. He must have gone through all the necessary initiations into the lore, he would have matured into an adult male knowing all the traditions, all the lore, all the proper things than an adult aboriginal was meant to know and he would have been seen as he was one of Winjan's kin, as someone who had a responsibility to his people and had a responsibility in how they might continue to be themselves and not sorry for it in a community that was then dominated by the white colonists.

It seems clear that Dower's skill intelligence and personality were recognised by the white community at that time. He was one of the aboriginals who was trusted by the Department of Lands & Surveys to give guidance and assistance and he was one of three remarkable aboriginal men, the other being Tommy Windich and Tommy Pierre, who well regarded by the young Forrest brothers when an opportunity came during the 1870's, to make names for themselves as explorers of the Western Australian inland.

I think we sometimes take these explorations a bit too much for granted. We assume that, yes there was the explorer and his men and they had their horses or camels, left from one point and got to another point with various adventures. I don't know that we ever reflect much on the forced intimacy and the great degree of trust and mutual confidence that has to exist between a small group of people that is going to be out for months at a time on an expedition out in the wild, living on their own skills and wits, having to trust each other implicitly before they get to the other end. One of the most attractive features of the Forrest brothers, both John and Alexander, that they do appear to have been on very good relationships with the aborigines that worked with them and that the aborigines in their turn were comfortable about working with them and respected them. This may seem to be something that you take for granted, but one only needs to compare it with the record of other explorers to see that it wasn't something that could be taken for granted. Consider Edward John Eyre who preceded John Forrest on the track across from S.A. to W.A. and how there was distrust among the aborigines who worked with him which eventually led to the killing of his companion Baxter and to that appalling trek that he had to make with one aboriginal companion, the other two having parted from him.

Consider a generation later, the Honorable David Carnegie, aristocratic Scottish explorer, who got on with the aborigines so badly, that his amiable habit was when it was necessary to find water, to capture one, and tie him up and keep him thirsty until he eventually revealed where the water holes were.

Now that kind of story one doesn't easily imagine about the Forrest's. They were good colonial boys, they teamed up with the aborigines, they knew each other's skills, they seemed to have some mutual respect and on each of the three major expeditions which they made: John & Alexander across the shores of the Great Australian Bight in 1870; John and Alexander inland in 1874; Alexander Forrest on the Kimberley trip in 1879; that degree of co-operation was quite remarkable.

Tommy Dower went in 1879 with A. Forrest with Tommy Pierre. Tommy Windich had died a few years earlier. It's clear from the description in A. Forrest's journals that this was a particularly arduous trip for all concerned. For Tommy Dower & Tommy Pierre it must have been especially a test for their courage and endurance because they were being taken 2000 kilometers or more away from their own country. They were travelling for 6 months through the country of strangers or groups with whom they had no previous contact, no sense of community. For them to find their way through country which was inhabited by spirits of other people and was traditionally the land of other people's dreaming & background. Yet they kept going. It was also a hard country in terms of health, both the white & aboriginal members of that party suffered a great deal. Mathew Forrest, Alexander's younger brother, was sick for much of the time and had to be tied to the saddle of his horse to prevent him from reeling off. Tommy Dower and Tommy Pierre both suffered, particularly Tommy Pierre. Tommy Dower was tough and resolute and kept going. He was with Forrest as they explored the valley of the Fitzroy doing a very useful job, Alexander Forrest wrote he could not have asked more of him. Weeks that they spent trying to push their path through the hostile terrain of the King Leopold Ranges. He was there when they discovered the Ord River; he was left with Fenton Hill the geologist and 2 others when A. Forrest and Arthur Hicks had to make their last dash for the Overland Telegraph Line in order to find their way back to safety and security.

In all this Alexander Forrest wrote when he made his report to the Surveyor General "I could not ask for greater fidelity than had been shown by Tommy Dower and Tommy Pierre."

They returned and were seen as having shown their capacity in a marked degree. There was to be a sequel to this as we shall see. Dower went back & lived with the aboriginal community. Winjan by this time was a very old patriarch. Jessie Hammond tells us that Winjan had 4 wives and was unusual in this because most aborigines had only one wife. Winjan had 4 because he had married women from the neighbouring peoples so that they would continue to live in friendship and amity.

Jessie Hammond adds that only one other aboriginal had more than one wife and this was Dower who had 2. Whether this was because of the same dynastic arrangement or for some other reason Jessie Hammond doesn't say. It would suggest that Dower was seen as one of the more outstanding characters in his own community and as Winjan grew very old, Dower was one of the senior men whose word was taken seriously and was consulted by the white people in their dealings with the aborigines.

At that time there was still the aboriginal camp that there had been ever since the white people could remember at the foot of Mt. Eliza in the vicinity of George Street where the present freeway is and Winjan and his people including Dower remained camped there until 1883/4. Those were the years of the measles epidemic. That sounds ridiculous. Measles is a childhood disease, we all get over it, it is good for a week off school and that is it. But the measles epidemic of 1883/4 was particularly grueling experience for the people of the isolated colony of Western Australia. Because of the isolation many of those common childhood epidemics had never come to the colony. There had been an outbreak of measles in 1860 and that had been the last time. There was a whole generation of children and young adults who had grown up without exposure to that particular complaint. The result was that when measles came to W.A. it struck people very severely indeed. Lady Barker, Lady Broome that later was, the new Governor's wife, was to go through the shops in Perth and find there was hardly anybody to serve because everybody was off ill.

Among the aboriginal community the disease struck with special violence, in fact there were more fatalities than probably from any other single cause in the whole history of the south-west aborigine. Winjan did not succumb to the measles, but he was very old and the shock of seeing so many of his people dying seems to have sapped his will to live. According to Jessie Hammond his people constructed a sort of litter and transported him all the way down to the Murray River to the country where he was born and there he died and Dower took over as the recognised leader of the remnant of the aboriginal community.

Dower gained a reputation in that capacity for about 11 years. These were years of great change. Years of first major railway building, when Albany and Geraldton and Kalgoorlie were linked to Perth. Years of massive migration because above all the years of the gold rushes when that sleepy small town that used to be Perth, no bigger than Busselton is now, suddenly found itself transformed into the capital of a leaping economy to become the El Dorado for people right across Australia and overseas. And that kind of impact made a great difference to the aboriginal people.

When Western Australia put up its case to the British Government for self-government in 1888 & 1889 the British were rather concerned about what would happen to the aboriginal community in W.A., and they insisted much against the will of the parliament of the time, that 1% of the consolidated revenue of W.A. should be devoted to the purposes of the aboriginal community. They also insisted that there should be an Aborigines Protection Board set up to look after interests of the aborigine and to administer this fund. The colonists complained of this with a special bitterness as the gold rushes went on, the amount of money coming into the coffers became even greater, because it seemed to them that this entitled the aboriginal people to a much greater amount of money than had been expected.

On the other hand the argument was put that this was what the British Government was intended and would it be a difficulty with the aboriginal community if a change was made.

And so it was in the September of 1893 that Alexander Forrest, by then a prosperous citizen, Mayor of PERTH, M.L.A, Government Whipp, a rich man doing well out of the gold rushes, stood up in the Legislative Assembly and said that he had done what no other man had thought to do. They had all been arguing about what to do with the aborigines and he had actually gone and consulted his old friend King Dower and asked what he thought about the Aborigines Protection Board. King Dower had told him that the Board wasn't doing their job properly. That in the old days before there was a Board if they had any complaint to make about the Government, if they had a request to make, he could go and talk to the Government directly and get a hearing. Now there was the Board and the bureaucrats were coming between him and the Government they weren't nearly so satisfied.

That is the last glimpse which we have of Dower. That he was seen as a suitable spokesman for his people. Alexander Forrest out of that old companionship which they had had in the Kimberley's thought enough of his advice to go and consult him and to take it seriously and to recount that advice to the Legislative Assembly. In the end I think the outcome wasn't satisfactory. After Dower died in 1897 the British Government finally abolished the Aborigines Protection Board and left direction of Western Australia's aborigines to the Forrest government.

While the Forrest's remained in power, up until 1901, it still seems to have worked satisfactorily because John and Alexander Forrest were seen to listen to aborigines, they both believed in the value of the direct contact. It was known that both of them at all times were willing to be visited by members of the aboriginal community to listen to their voices as they had listened to Tommy Dower. Alexander Forrest died in 1901 and John Forrest went into federal Politics. Then a different state of affairs pertained.

The bureaucracy remained intermediary between the aboriginal community and the rest of the community. Policy where the aborigines could walk where they wished to in Perth ceased. Perth was banned to them. Segregation came in and we got into that very miserable relationship where the Moore River settlement the pressing down into the status of second class citizen was all that we had to offer our aboriginal community.

Whatever the shortcomings were of the Forrest's. They were 19th century pioneers and had not wished to go in for that form of segregation. They had seen the aborigines as people with whom they could coexist, whom they could trust, and be trusted by them. They had seen leaders of the aboriginal community like Tommy Dower who accepted this and responded to it and who had played a significant part in ensuring the survival of their people in difficult circumstances.

I suppose that one of the valuable things historians have done recently in W.A., and the Historical Society is contributing to that is being aided by this Memorial Service when we commemorate Tommy Dower, is the recognition that the history of W.A. is not exclusively the property of one part of the people, the white pioneers, not only the aborigines, not only the gentry, not only the workers, but its a community effort in which all are involved and in which recognition must be given to the part everybody has played.

So that it's a hopeful gesture and I think a significant one, and it reminds us that at the end of the day the people of the 1890's saw fit that Tommy Dower should be interred with all the other pioneers at East Perth and that this meant that there was no going back to Winjan's generation. This was the proper place where he should lie. And I think that is a thing of great importance.

Thank you very much.