

# Thomas Conquit: conquering a colonial past

Michael Powell  
University of Tasmania

The drama that unfolded in the Adelong Coroner's Court caused a sensation well beyond the town, then sank beyond memory without a trace. And though it may have escaped 'the grand repertoire of history', it 'imitate[s] it in miniature',<sup>1</sup> yielding a wider Australian tale of colonial formation. The evidence from the inquest 'touching on the death of Thomas Conquit, the culprit of the tragedy of the 16<sup>th</sup> instant', Adelong (NSW), 17 June 1912, is spare and skeletal, yet jostled in its reporting by the 'state of excitement' that swept the town.<sup>2</sup> The proceedings reveal much about contemporary ideas of class and race, and about attitudes to authority in a small country community. Moreover, a closer examination of the personal and family history of Thomas Conquit opens a window on Australia's multicultural origins.

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Mr C. Smith told the Adelong Coroner's Court how Tom Conquit 'came onto him at the Condonblonga gate' on Thursday 13 June. Conquit had been very excitable, set on telling Smith the importance of what he had to say. He had a 'big knife sticking in his belt' and gripped a .22 pea rifle. 'I am a different man to what you used to know me', he declared. 'I am a spiritualist now'. Having received 'instructions from a very big bird and a lot of little ones around it', he had 'a mission': 'To kill all the whites especially the police'. And 'If those two at Adelong try to take me I will shoot one and knock the brains out of the other with the butt end of my rifle'. Smith, consumed with unease by the menace that invaded the words of the 'wild looking armed man right along side of him', immediately rode into Adelong, heading straight to the newspaper office, where he minutely recounted, then re-dissected, his meeting with Conquit. And probably it was aired again at a pub command performance, for madness is a quality all possess and fear in its possession.

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<sup>1</sup> G. Swift, *Waterland*, London, 1992, p. 41.

<sup>2</sup> 'The Adelong Shooting Tragedy: The Inquest', and 'Sunday Morning Tragedy', *Adelong and Tumut Express*, 21 June 1912. Direct speech is as reported. The assistance of Val Wilkinson, Tumut History Group, is gratefully acknowledged.

By Friday evening rumour got round that Tom Conquit was 'drilling two boys on the outskirts of the town'. On Saturday morning someone was spreading about that 'Conquit had fired a shot up the main street of the town', but there was 'absolutely no truth' in it, according to the press. Rumour churned unease and fear was 'beginning to work upon the people'. A 'civilian said he saw Conquit crouching against R. M. Prowse's blacksmith shop' on Saturday night and this 'brought the scare to fever heat and some of the trembling ones went so far as to say that Sergeant Duprez was not game to try and arrest him'. But as the paper put it, 'the next morning's action proved what a little they knew of the grit and bravery of the noble officer who silently all through that Saturday night was watching and guarding them from danger'.<sup>3</sup>

It was difficult to know when Tom began to be noticed as odd. In the later retelling, many made wise by events identified astonishing prescience of previous behaviour. Senior Sergeant Duprez from the Adelong police told the Coroner's Court he had known Tom Conquit some six or seven years, and thought him an 'imbecile', but nevertheless 'harmless'. Senior Sergeant Costello from Tumut police told the Court Tom had a 'strain of the aboriginal' in him, and though he had only known him for about twelve months, 'from the first time ... he struck me as being of unsound mind ... He had a habit, when anyone passed him on the road, to turn around and watch them till; they were out of sight', Costello added, 'And I knew he used to camp under logs'.<sup>4</sup> Hubert Perfect, Tom Conquit's half brother, told the Court that he had 'noticed for years he had been getting religious madness'. Hubert deposed that Tom 'thought the white race had a set on the black race', and 'were shooting them down in the country one at a time'. But he disagreed that Tom was Aboriginal. Tom's father was 'a dark man, but I do not know his nationality'. Possibly his father was 'either Indian or African, I think', but Tom himself was certainly 'not an Australian black'.<sup>5</sup>

What had brought things to a head happened out at West Blowering, near Tumut, where Tom Conquit was working with Ah Soon, the Chinese market gardener, known as 'Smiler' by locals on

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<sup>3</sup> *Adelong and Tumut Express*, 21 June 1912.

<sup>4</sup> *Tumut and Adelong Times*, 21 June 1912.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*; *Adelong and Tumut Express*, 21 June 1912. However in the *Tumut and Adelong Times*, Hubert is reported as saying Tom thought whites were shooting down blacks 'one country at a time', a quite different emphasis.

account of his ingratiating grin. Mr James Stanfield lived half a mile from Ah Soon on his son's property and on 11 June noticed Tom coming 'from the direction of Smiler's garden'. A little later he heard a knock at the back door, went down to investigate and found Tom clutching a .22 pea rifle. Stanfield asked, 'What's the matter Tom?', and was immediately met with flaring rage and a rifle brought threateningly to the shoulder. 'You bastard! I'll show you! Go down on your knees and say your prayers, for I'm going to shoot you!' The two stood a yard apart in tense connection, but Jim remained calm: 'What have I ever done to you, Tom?' But Tom shook with a raging tantrum, stamping his foot and screaming for Jim to get on his knees. 'I'll cut your liver out and shoot the bloody lot of you!' he screamed. And so it continued for another four or five minutes. Then, the rage seemingly expended, Tom abruptly turned and walked quickly down the side of the house, out onto the road and back towards Ah Soon's.<sup>6</sup> Stanfield told his son of the altercation and he went to ask Mr A. H. P. Watts, owner of Blowering Station, the largest in the area and guardian of the only phone, to call the police in Tumut. A bench warrant was swiftly issued for Tom Conquit's arrest on a charge of lunacy.

When Hubert Perfect married Annie Goode in 1890, everyone from priest to postie offered endless puns on the obvious potential of the combined surnames. After their marriage they went to live in a simple cottage in Camp Street over the bridge from the main town. Their house was a simple rectangular block divided into two small rooms with a verandah the length of the building and a pitched roof folded in neatly at either end to allow fire places to bookend the structure. Out of this packing case house they brought forth seven children, who were farmed out to other relatives as the seams of their dwelling showed strain. Tom was Hubert's half brother, born of the same womb, but their mother had died when Tom was quite young and after her death the family was scattered and Tom grew up 'rough'. So it was not surprising that tales of Tom's doings reached Hubert sooner even than it roused the town.

On Thursday afternoon Tom had called at Hubert's house and the children had later given their mother the drum. The next day Hubert set out and found Tom, about 10:00am, 'asleep in the rain with no boots on, and his head resting on his hat'.<sup>7</sup> Hubert later told the Court they then went hunting before returning that evening to the house.

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<sup>6</sup> *Tumut and Adelong Times*, 21 June 1912, and 28 June 1912.

<sup>7</sup> *Adelong and Tumut Express*, 21 June 1912.

Tom stayed over the next few days, and as Hubert's son Robert was later to recall, 'We slept together on a bed made down on the floor' with Tom nursing his rifle beside him as they slept. They got up at about six o'clock on Sunday, rolled up their bed, and wandered out to the kitchen, a lean-to skillion tacked on the back. The rest of the house was beginning to stir. Annie and Hubert, roused by their daughter, moved to the front room, clutching themselves before the open fire. Annie stared out the window at the reluctant light dawdling over the distant hills and noticed two men rugged in morning mist walking with some determination up the lane.<sup>8</sup>

She turned to her husband: 'I wonder who they are?' When they reached the front gate she recognised one, 'Oh! It's the Sergeant', and as she reached for the front door, Tom rushed in from the kitchen and snatched up his rifle from the corner of the room. Annie was momentarily distracted but as her attention returned to the handle, the door gave way in her hand, impelled by the Sergeant's attempts to enter from the other side. The door opened about a foot and Annie put her head round to attend to the inquiry. 'Is Tommy here?' Sergeant Duprez inquired, and Annie gave a slight nod. 'Where is he?' and again Annie indicated with a slight wordless turn of her head that he was in the room behind her. Duprez leant his arm against the door and forced it open to see Tom about six feet from him with a pea rifle to his shoulder. 'Tom Conquit put that rifle down', Duprez uttered firmly. But Tom jumped about in agitation, shouting 'Come on you bastard. Its me and you for it'. Annie, still at the door, and suddenly swept by alarm and fear, pleaded with her heart and a sudden rush of tears, 'Oh! Tommy don't! Tommy, please don't, oh! don't!' But Tom was determined, 'Yes I will misses. Get out of the way!'

'Put that rifle down, Tommy!' Duprez shouted as he drew a stout .45 service revolver from his coat pocket. 'If you don't, I'll shoot you!' Tom started at the sight of the revolver and ducked behind the door out of line of sight, but Duprez stepped resolutely into the room confronting Tom at distance of only a yard or so, and fired. 'Tommy intended to fire', Duprez was later to say. 'I saw his eyes were flashing!' The gun exploded and recoiled in his hand and Tom staggered back and slid slowly down the wall, endeavouring all the while to cock his rifle. 'I'm not done yet and will die game', Tom spluttered as Duprez ripped the rifle from his grip. Constable McKay rushed into the room behind Duprez panting cordite. 'Will I give him another?' 'No!' Duprez

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8 *Ibid.*

said holding his arm back emphatically. 'He's badly hurt! Help me take him out on the verandah'.<sup>9</sup> Hubert, who had sat all the while beside the fireplace, confined by events, moved now to Tom's side and helped carry him to the verandah. He kneeled on the rough sawn timber, Tom's head cradled between his knees. He looked into the face reversed to him and watched the signs of life weep away. Only when the sergeant began to undo Tom's coat and flannel shirt to reveal a bruised wound in the left breast did his mind begin to comprehend that the death and departure belonged definitely to Tom.

Duprez began to fiddle with Tom's rifle and Hubert looked up to warn him it was still cocked. Duprez opened the breach, ejecting an empty shell. 'Great Scott!' Duprez said, 'I've just shot a man with an empty rifle!' The sergeant wheeled and walked a few paces along the verandah before wincing with pain. He stopped and examined the blood on his clothes. 'He did shoot, alright!' he said, almost relieved. But no one could recall the sound of a second shot and agreed solemnly that Tom's rifle must have discharged at precisely the same time the Sergeant fired. Duprez was quizzing himself, going over events, examining them for reason and justification, not quite able to shed doubt. And it was a doubt that echoed about the town, a disproportion in events that questioned the moral thunder of authority. After all it was only a bloody single shot pea rifle for Christ's sake, became the pub refrain. 'We have seen a large dog killed... at 70 yards' with a .22 short cartridge, the *Tumut and Adelong Times* editorialised. 'We can vouch that the rifle Conquit had ... will kill a man at 100 yards if hit on a vital spot', the paper continued to protest. And 'we mention this to show that it was a deadly weapon that Senr. Sergeant Duprez was facing'. The action of authority was being brought into question and such doubt sought a suitably indignant and stentorian defence.

As for the Sergeant's personal attributes, 'it is pleasing to find that he was true when duty called and faced death fearlessly to carry out the laws of the state and to defend the public weal. His courage was admirable'. And there was evidence of public gratitude in 'scores of letters and telegrams ... from all over the state, from men in high positions and even old aged pensioners and the fossicking miner'. Sufficient, it would seem, to justify whatever action occurred and warranting the 'hope the Department will show appreciation of the

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*; *Tumut and Adelong Times*, 21 and 28 June 1912.

brave deed by giving him a well merited promotion'.<sup>10</sup> The merited virtue of official action, however, must have sounded hollow to those hollowed by events and grieved by actions always overwhelmingly disproportionate to whatever offence.

While it is clear Tom Conquit only vaguely understood origins erased by the jumble of generations, he nevertheless understood the implications of his black descent. There is often within madness the expression of a truth that escapes the prudent confines of 'normality' and Tom Conquit's conjuring of a colonial conspiracy to systematically kill black people evokes events in a real world. While 'irrational', it is not without content and provides an odd kind of evidence of racial violence. There is also something immensely sad about the confirmation of Tom Conquit's paranoid delusion in his own death. But then there is almost an hermetic manner in which oppressed people can conjure the instruments of their own demise and make deeply felt metaphors come to life. Such metaphors enact as performance, inviting others into a menacing choreography where parts seem assigned and the outcome inevitable.

Sergeant Duprey, as he climbed the incline of Camp Street that Sunday morning, seemed as much drawn as driven by events, armed as he was with a .45 revolver. The weaponry is important for its effect and intention, for the Webley hinged frame revolver, designed in the 1870s, and the standard British War Office issue for half a century, was a weapon of particular qualities.<sup>11</sup> A large calibre, low velocity weapon, its intention was simple — to stop an assailant in their tracks at close quarters. The impact of the bullet would have hurled Conquit back several metres against the wall. And yet the bullet may not have even exited his body. While the entry point would have been no larger than the bullet, the damage to adjacent organs and tissue would have been massive. This was an imperial weapon, meant to stop charging 'natives' at close quarters and it was astonishingly effective. Given Tom's sense of a systematic decimation of black people, it was the most 'appropriate' weapon to have brought him down.

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<sup>10</sup> 'The Deadly Pea-Rifle', *Tumut & Adelong Times*, 28 June 1912.

<sup>11</sup> W. H. J. Chamberlain and A. W. F. Taylerson, *Revolvers of the British Services 1854-1954*, Bloomfield (Ont.), 1989, chapt. 3. According to Brad Manera of the Australian War Memorial, the weapon was probably a .455 Webley Mk IV or RIC Webley which were both carried by NSW Police at the time.

If you conjured a character like 'Perfect', ladled it with irony and married him to 'Goode', or had a doomed hero called 'Conquit' (a French past tense for 'conquered') and a predatory constable called Duprez (where the emphasis dwelled on the pronunciation 'prey'), you would be rightly criticised for Bunyan-esque parody and heavy handed banality. (What is more alarming is that a number of the family went on to marry into the Best, Christian and Saint's families). But such parodies and puns frequently occur in 'real' life and historical discourse, existing beyond accident and certainly beyond intention. The story of Thomas Conquit is a sad parade of mocking elements that turn characters into caricatures and leach them of their humanity, yet this often seems the outcome of human endeavour: in the struggle for worth, others are made unworthy. These occurrences of parody are ones that duck and weave through Australian formation and identity from the meaningless heroics of a Burke and Wills to the puffed up men of modern Australian politics. Like most Australian stories they begin somewhere else, the elaboration of a human drama played out by accident in some arbitrary part of the Australian landscape.

The story of Hubert Perfect, Tom Conquit's half brother, begins with his father, John Perfect, who seems at first glance a familiar outgrowth of Irish legend, a Catholic of Northern Ireland who migrated to Australia for reasons unknown. According to his obituary he was born in 1801 and attained the startling accomplishment of being, at the time of his death at 109 in 1910, the oldest man in Australia, though as he lay in his coffin, his healthy head of grey hair and his natty goatee beard made him appear more a man of seventy than a decrepit centenarian. John Perfect had supposedly come to Australia in his boyhood and settled in the Tumbarumba district, then 'thickly inhabited by Blacks of many tribes'. He became a teamster with his own wagon and team of bullocks, conveying wool, particularly for a Mr Jonathon Goldspink of Bago near Tumbarumba, NSW. His trips to Sydney in those early days took him through thick scrub and a 'wilderness of Gum-trees' that had since become part of the city itself.<sup>12</sup>

His obituary seems confirmed by his death certificate and his burial at the Cootamundra Cemetery according to Catholic rites, but official information relies on accurate disclosure.<sup>13</sup> And obituaries are

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<sup>12</sup> John Perfect's obituary from the *Albury Banner*, 1910, courtesy of Judie Moore.

<sup>13</sup> John Perfect, died 14 May 1910 aged 109, NSW Register of Births Deaths and Marriages (hereafter NSW BDM), 1910/5109.

frequently fumigated before release. If this were not the case, the obvious virtue, goodness and benign generosity of the departed set forth in obituaries would mean only the good depart, and would explain the corruption of the world they leave behind. However, sanitising the departed pioneers of Australia was a formulaic task of particular nineteenth century importance, especially necessary for those of hidden convict origin, since such would be the ultimate triumph over the judgement of others. John Perfect's obituary fails to disclose that he had been a convict, sentenced at the Kent Quarter Sessions in January 1838 to fifteen years for horse theft, aged nineteen.<sup>14</sup> And while the convict Indents may themselves be inaccurate, this would make his date of birth about 1820 and his age at death, a comparatively youthful ninety.<sup>15</sup> Obviously, as he aged, so his birth receded in an Irish retelling till he achieved a respectable antiquity. Or so it would appear except the records give a different picture. There his 'native place' is given as Kent and his religion as Protestant. Why he would claim both Irish birth and Catholicism, hardly favourable attributes at that time, is difficult to fathom, though many Irish labourers resided in southern England then, both valued and resented as a source of cheap agricultural labour. He may well have had an Irish ancestry with which he strongly identified, at the time when memories of the 'Troubles' in Ireland were sharp and raw.

Whatever his personal reinvention, at thirty, after receiving permission, as a convict was required, he married Anne Goldspink, (1832-1885) on 10 April 1851 at Bago Station, Tumbarumba. She was the nineteen year old daughter of Jonathon Goldspink, the man whose wool John transported to Sydney. They already had a six month old daughter Jemima (b. 1850), and over the years set forth a quiverful of offspring, including the Hubert Perfect of our story. After their marriage they settled in Sharps Creek, not far from Bago, between Adelong and Batlow, lured by the prospect of newly discovered gold.<sup>16</sup> The mother of Anne Goldspink, Margaret Reid or Reed (1813-1898) was Aboriginal, and Anne, probably half or at least quarter Aboriginal,

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<sup>14</sup> Perfect was transported on the *Teresa* with his 21 year old brother, Richard [Indents 1836-39: 683-42, SRNSW] who had been charged as an accomplice.

<sup>15</sup> In information he would have supplied on the birth of his daughter, Susan, 27 March 1858, and his son Hubert, 6 May 1860, his place of birth is given as Dartford, Kent and his age, 38yrs and 40yrs respectively. NSW BDM, Registration numbers 1858/12537 & 1860/12801

<sup>16</sup> NSW BDM, V1851151 80. Here Perfect appears as Parfet. Both his obituary and death certificate mention fourteen children, yet records only reveal ten. Anne's death certificate (NSW BDM no.14682), only mentions nine, though ten can be traced.



was undoubtedly dark. Margaret apparently had been placed in a 'church home' run by Reverend Thomas Hassall at an early age and grew up religious and literate. She was a very fine seamstress and in her latter years regarded as 'stern but fair'.<sup>17</sup>

Jonathon Goldspink whatever his later accomplishment and success was himself a convict, sentenced to life for stealing six sheep from the Thetford common in 1825. In NSW he was assigned to Thomas Hassall's son, James, which accounts for his meeting and match with Margaret. While he left a family behind in England, the conditions of his pardon precluded his return, so like many others, Jonathon declared himself a 'widower' and began his life anew with Margaret Reid. Whatever level of conscious perturbation this may have caused, there is little doubt the stamp of Australia as a 'new' beginning, imposed or otherwise, was indelible. For that generation and those that followed, the past was literally another continent, severed by sea and time, never to be revisited.

After Jonathon's marriage to the distinctively Aboriginal Margaret Reid, they moved to Tumberumba and selected land at Bago. It was not prime country, but his use of the title 'squatter' (on the baptism record of his son, Samuel, in January 1856) indicates his aspirations. The reality fell short occasionally and he was forced to write to the Colonial Treasurer regarding depasture license arrears and fines, citing as an excuse his large family and his Aboriginal wife. Nevertheless, when he eventually retired to Yass it must have seemed a career culmination (and vindication) when he was made a council Alderman. Pinnacle it was, for within two months he was dead, having fallen from his horse.<sup>18</sup>

Given his obvious ambition, Goldspink's marriage to the Aboriginal Margaret Reid, seems odd, even assuming genuine affection and the public affirmation of marriage. The racism of twentieth century Australia makes the relationship appear unthinkable, but this is because racism tends to be seen as a static rather than chameleon cultural phenomenon. The late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century had a relatively robust tolerance of inter-racial relationships, but this fused into a virulent European racism by

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<sup>17</sup> *Yass Courier*, 13 May 1898, for her obituary. I am grateful to Jill Roder for information on Margaret Reid.

<sup>18</sup> *Yass Courier*, 14 April 1876. Goldspink was buried next to Hamilton Hume, the explorer, who had been a visitor to his Bago station. He left an estate of some £2,000. I am indebted to Christine Grieves for some of this information

the late-nineteenth century that clouded with denial the significant and frequent early contact between white and indigenous Australians.<sup>19</sup> The presence of a substantial number of indigenous people at the time of invasion, and the gender imbalance and male predominance among early convicts, together meant there was an inevitable cross racial connection and the obvious outcome of offspring. Whenever persons arriving prior to about 1840 are traced, convict origin is almost inevitable and indigenous ancestry not uncommon. As more individual genealogies of convict origin are unearthed, this will become increasingly apparent.

As nineteenth century racism ripened those on the periphery were often drawn into alliance. And other than those of colour or criminality, no other group in Australian society attracted such social odium as the Irish. John Perfect's assumption of an alien Irish Catholic identity, for whatever reason, locates him at the social margin, which the alliance with Anne Goldspink would confirm. Their gravitation to the gold fields placed them in a further marginal borderland, a frontier where marginality was the rule not the exception, but where the lure was of socially transforming wealth.

It was a story repeated around 1850, around Australia and the world. When alluvial gold was revealed in 1851 the subsequent rush saw hamlets spring up along the Adelong Creek. By 1855 the Camp emerged as the disordered community of several thousand with 'suburbs' like 'Yankeeland', 'Chinkei Town', 'Irish Point' and 'Germantown', places housing the entrepreneurial and often ethnically marginal.<sup>20</sup> Then, as the rush sobered, the accumulated wealth moved across the creek and reconstructed itself into the respectable Victorian township of Adelong, with Camp Street an unfortunate reminder of a disreputable youth. The rush now was on to be 'respectable'. John Perfect's son Hubert and his wife Anne, living in their run down rented cottage in Camp Street, were remainders of that reminder.

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<sup>19</sup> R. Hyam. *Empire and Sexuality: The British Experience*, Manchester, 1991. The way words enter language often indicates a need to express concepts. 'Racialism' and 'racism' enter the language in 1907 and 1936 respectively as self-conscious racism begins to come under scrutiny. *The Compact Oxford English Dictionary* 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, Oxford, 1991, p. 1497.

<sup>20</sup> L. Gedye, *Batlow: The Growing Years for Gold and Apples* Sydney, 1978. p. 8.

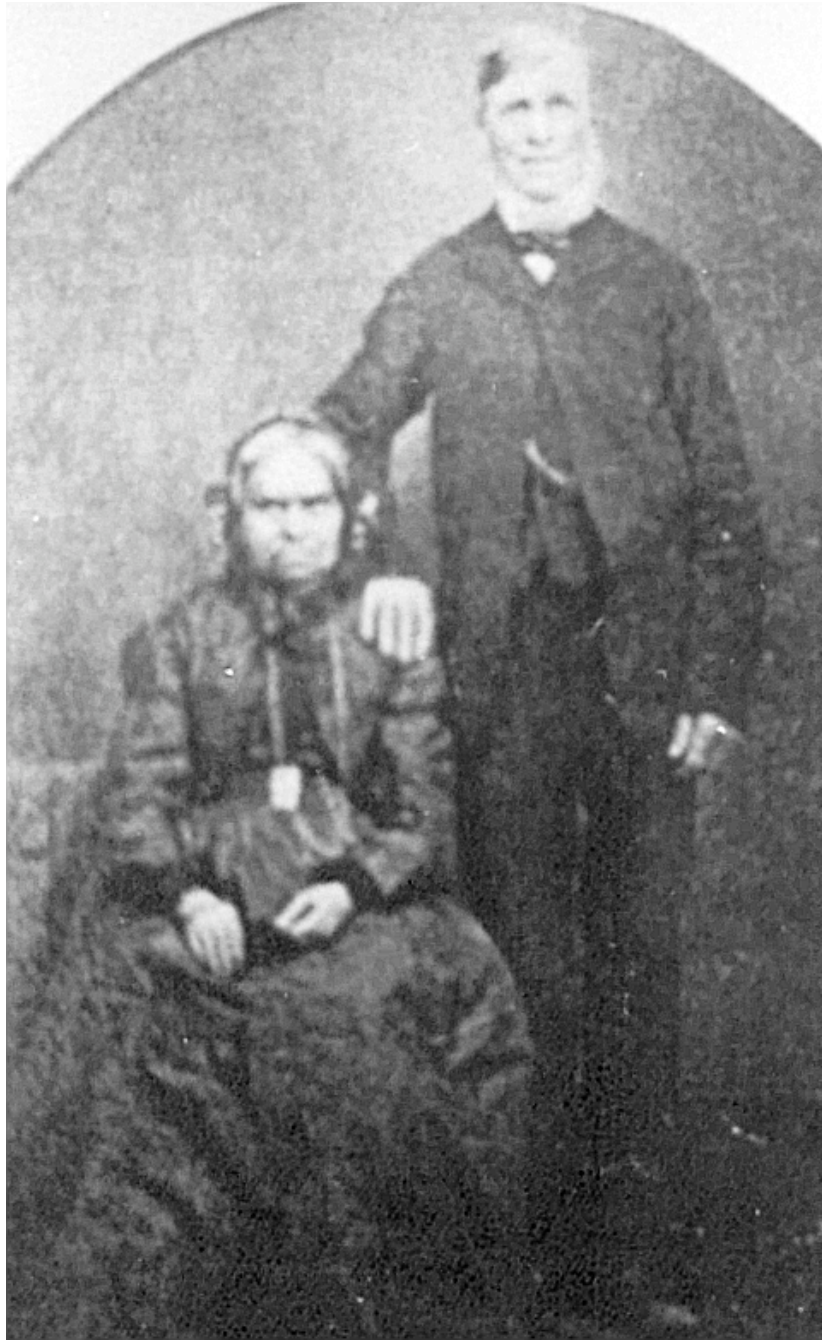


Figure 1: Margaret and Jonathon Goldspink ...

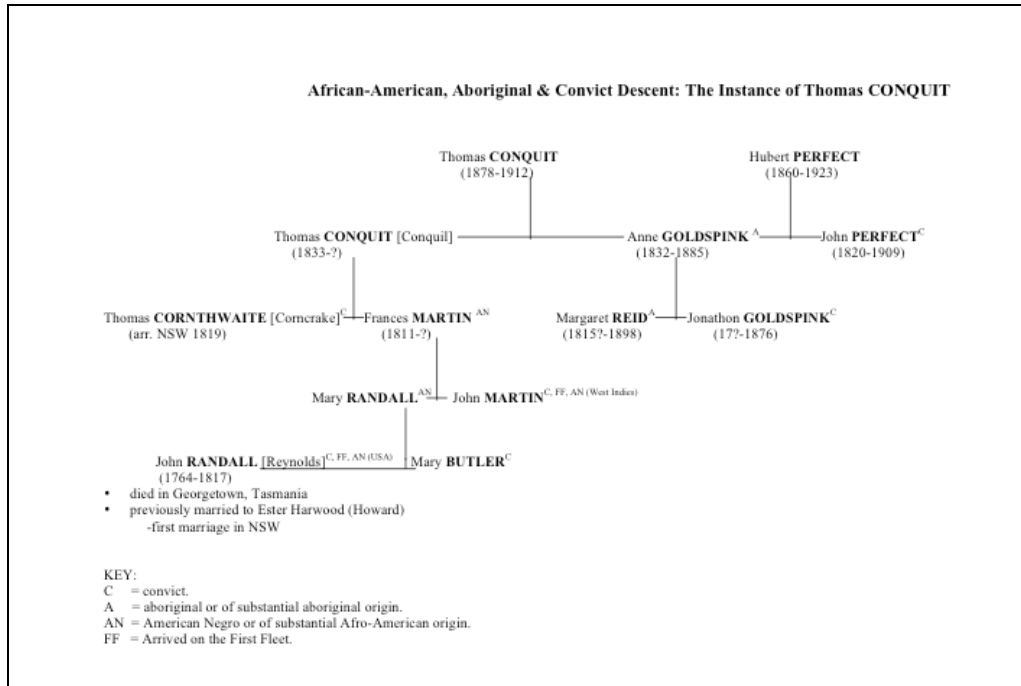


Figure 2:

Hubert Perfect admitted at the Adelong inquest that Tom Conquit was his half brother, and this because somewhere in the 1870s John Perfect and his wife, Anne Goldspink, separated and she formed a relationship with Thomas Conquit senior, father of Tom.<sup>21</sup> Hubert described Tom's father as a 'dark man', but not Aboriginal, blood which in fact was Hubert's through their mutual mother, and apparent in his own looks. From the conspicuous silence in Hubert's evidence, it might appear as if he was attempting denial of Aboriginality in deference to an undoubted underlying racism. This would have been made more real by the presence on the five man jury of 'W.J Taylor', probably John Walter Taylor (1880-1917) the son of Hubert's sister, Jemima (1850-1891), who himself would have had Aboriginal blood and looks. The proceedings of the inquest are riven with assumptions about class and race. For example, the inquest called Mr Watts, a local dignitary whose

<sup>21</sup> Who left whom is unclear, however parish maps of Sharps Creek indicate that Thomas Conquit had a selection adjoining John Perfect which accounts for the later connection. I am grateful to Val Wilkinson for this information.

sole contribution was to telephone the police, yet did not call Ah Soon, the market gardener who may have been able to add understanding to the incident with Stanfield. He is simply 'Smiler' the Chinaman, whose sobriquet parodied his ingratiating manner.

Hubert Perfect's explanation of his half brother's background steers round the taint of Aboriginality, but scrutiny of the relationship of Hubert's part Aboriginal mother with Thomas Conquit (Tom's father), reveals more complexity. Thomas Conquit senior had been married to the unfortunately named Mary Ann Scragg in 1853. Both were illiterate and made their mark. Mary Ann died in 1875, in time to explain Thomas Conquit's connection with Anne Goldspink and the birth of young Tom Conquit. Thomas Sr. was born 1 June 1833, Thomas 'Cornquill'. His sister Hannah was registered as 'Corncrake'. His father, Thomas Cornthwaite, was a sailor, convicted in Liverpool in 1818 and transported on the *Baring 2* in 1819, gaining his Certificate of Freedom in 1825. The mother of Thomas Conquit Sr was Frances Martin, born in 1811 and she was to provide a factor that contributed to her grandson's death in 1912. She was black, though not Aboriginal, being descended from two North American black convicts aboard the First Fleet.<sup>22</sup>

One legacy of the American Revolution was how to dispose of the many convicted felons previously shipped as coerced labour to the American colonies. Another problem was what to do with the 20,000 African American slaves encouraged to resist the American Revolutionary forces.<sup>23</sup> Some went to Canada, some to the purpose created colony of Sierra Leone. Many ended up in England where some were subsequently transported for crimes committed. One of these was John Randall (or Reynolds), born c.1764, an African American, possibly an ex-slave, from Connecticut, sentenced to seven years transportation for stealing a steel watch chain and sent on the *Alexander* in 1788 on the First Fleet to Botany Bay. On arrival he married a white convict, Ester (Harwood) Howard, the first marriage in the new colony, ironic indeed given the later history of 'White Australia'. It is indicative of the diverse nature of early Australian settlement, which later racist policies obscure historically and which

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<sup>22</sup> M. Gillen. *The Founders of Australia: A Biographical Dictionary of the First Fleet*, Sydney, 2000, pp. 423-4. There were 14 North American's on the First Fleet and 12, possibly 18 black convicts,

<sup>23</sup> P. Linebaugh and M. Rediker, *The Many Head Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic*, Boston, 2000, pp. 239, 267.

makes modern multiculturalism far from the novel aspect of Australian formation it is portrayed. Randall's wife Ester, however, died in 1789, probably in childbirth, and in 1790 he married Mary Butler, an Irish convict who had been tried at the Old Bailey for stealing a basket of beans at Covent Garden. One of their children, Mary Randall, married John Martin in 1812 and had thirteen children one of whom was Frances Martin, born in 1811.<sup>24</sup>

John Martin was also an African American, probably from the West Indies, tried at the Old Bailey for stealing clothing, and also transported on the *Alexander* with Randall. His marriage to Mary Randall would have meant their daughter Frances would have been quite dark, and her later relationship with Cornthwaite, which produced four children, would have meant her offspring were dark. One of those children was Thomas Cornquil (or Cornthwaite or Conquit), and in his later relationship with Ann Perfect/Goldspink, he sired the doomed Thomas Conquit Jr, bringing together African-American, European and Aboriginal lineages, though these quickly became lost, confused or forgotten.<sup>25</sup> This African-American presence was little remarked on in colonial narrative, yet it recurs with remarkable frequency. Even Mary Ann Scragg, the first wife of Thomas Conquit Sr., was herself of African American origin, though whether they consciously understood this is unknown. What is clear is that Conquit Sr. gravitated in his relationships to women of colour, probably as much for reasons of necessity as choice.

The young Thomas Conquit (b. 1878) retained, according to Hubert Perfect's evidence, a strong sense of black identity and consciousness of black oppression. Though he undoubtedly suffered a degree of paranoia, delusion and probably schizophrenia, he was also afflicted by a very coherent perception of prejudice that was likely to have been grounded in reality and experience. So while the expression

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<sup>24</sup> Randall later became a member of the NSW Corp between 1808-10, was granted land and became a Sydney constable in 1811, before selling up and departing for Launceston. He died in 1817 at Port Dalrymple, when he was brutally murdered by two convicts and a soldier. *Hobart Town Gazette*, 26 July 1817; D. Chapman, *1788 The People of the First Fleet*, Sydney, 1988, p. 166-7; M. Gillen, *op. cit.*, pp. 165, 298, 322. Gillen does not indicate his later life and death in Tasmania.

<sup>25</sup> Gillen, *op. cit.*, p. 239. Martin was described as 'black' and a 'sober industrious man'. In 1792 he settled at Field of Mars, near Randall, and also became a constable. Frances Martin later established a relationship with a John Ingram, a sawyer from Goulburn with whom she had six children between 1843-55. When Ingram died in 1862 his wife's name on the death certificate is Frances Martin 'an aboriginal person'.

of racism among white Australians at the time was largely unconscious, or if perceived at all, assumed as 'natural' and thus not particularly consequential, it is clear from Conquit's rage that those who experienced it felt it keenly.<sup>26</sup> His was a profoundly frustrated rage that was not as 'irrational' as the characterisation of 'lunacy' suggests. The imposition and assumption of 'madness' dismissed his confused emotions and created a trap for him that ultimately confirmed as rational the fears he expressed irrationally. It has a sacrificial inevitability, a madness that mocks his attempts to explicate his world as much as the accidental French meaning of his name Conquit, 'conquered'.

It is difficult for an individual who perceives an antagonistic world to accept that the antagonists are largely unconscious of their actions. It requires intentionality, which is resolved by interpreting some form of unspoken 'conspiracy'. And while Conquit's 'conspiracy' is 'irrational' it rationalises, not his own, but the inherently irrational and overtly destructive behaviour of others, and is obviously not without some foundation in imperial practice. Focusing his inchoate rage finds an immediate target, not surprisingly, in the police, symbols of authority, and in his mind, obviously, oppression.

The conduct of the inquest and the manner in which events were handled, enacted as a mutual madness, a '*folie à foule*'. There is no doubt Tom's behaviour was odd and his threats against James Stanfield of real concern, but the reaction of the authorities and townspeople was as distorted as Conquit's own behaviour. It was sufficiently odd that an arrest warrant for lunacy could be issued on the basis of lay opinion. Any why was this charge proffered instead of the more common one of assault and threatening use of a weapon? What recourse to the lunacy law allowed was potential performance and permission for those in authority to exercise it unfettered. Police and like authorities tend to view themselves in such circumstances as defenders of order with an extra-judicial role, not only enforcing but determining law and propriety. That was accepted, but not universally.

Sergeant Duprez, an otherwise conventional officer of honour, evidences this in his approach to the arrest of Conquit. He not unreasonably doffed plain clothes, not uniform, so as not to alarm the 'culprit', as he expressed it. This is an odd term, since Tom was to be

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<sup>26</sup> See W. Anderson *The Cultivation of Whiteness: Science Health and Racial Destiny in Australia*, Melbourne, 2002, for a recent discussion on race and 'whiteness'.

arrested for lunacy, not any offence committed, and 'culprit' implies guilt and blame. But then meanings elide, for in a sense Conquit's lunacy was a 'crime' against accepted boundaries. And boundaries are continually subject to challenge. On Duprez's own admission he forced open the door of the Camp Street house without seeking permission, and once inside he challenged Tom Conquit to surrender and shot him when he refused. This took place with Ann Perfect near the door in line of fire, Hubert Perfect sitting beside the fireplace, and at least two of the Perfect's children within range. Duprez's action disregarded the danger to others, yet none of this rated a mention in the inquest, indicating in subtle silence the valuation of the Perfect's. And yet Duprez showed an odd reaction to the shooting. His surprise at what he believed was an empty cartridge in Tom's gun and his assumption he shot a person who was no threat, caused him considerable alarm and obvious distress. It probably revealed his innermost doubts — that despite the inflation of events, Tom really was of no particular threat. The discovery of a flesh wound in his thigh came almost as a relief.

This revealing performance by Duprez was not without justification. To some in the community, familiar and even casual with weapons, the absurd disproportion in firepower between a single shot .22 pea rifle and a multi-shot 45 revolver was obviously risible and a clear over response. The justificatory editorial in the *Tumut and Adelong Times* reveals an undercurrent of alternate opinion, one that has no detectable voice, except indirectly in the words of official reaction. The newspaper editor's ascent into pompous hyperbole in defence of Duprez does not dispel the impression that people were able to detect the absurdity and oppressive tendency of authority. These were people of relative unimportance, with less respect for authority than authority desires. Tom Conquit had quickly focused his anger at the police and with some justification. There was an obvious underlying resentment of their peremptory behaviour and assumption of power.

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The story of Tom Conquit was told to me as a child from a remembrance of another childhood, though what is narrated here is far more concise than the cluttered tale I was originally told. It nagged, as some tales do, to be released from curiosity, but in dissecting the entrails of narrative one always encounters the unexpected. In the tale I was told there was not a whiff of convicts or African American intrusion, yet as I explored I kept stumbling on convicts and a dark discourse of race. This encounter with a convict past ought not have



been so unexpected. This was 1912, long after convictism, though of course many ex-convicts and their immediate descendants lived late into the nineteenth and early twentieth century.

But there is another reason, wrapped in the formation of Australian identity. Britain in some way has always, even in jest, reminded Australians of their penal origins. And the late nineteenth century vogue of eugenics drove home to Australians a new iron law of genetic determinism and inferiority that apparently condemned them to be 'once a convict always a convict'. Historians like George Arnold Wood blustered about the innocents caught and the worst remaining at 'Home', and later historians like Russel Ward built a tale of noble resistance, mateship and solidarity, all of which nevertheless continued to tie Australia in some way to a discourse of 'convict stain'.<sup>27</sup> It took a tragic rush up a slope of withering fire at Gallipoli to satisfy the stain of deep uncertainty.

But what was also unexpected was to come across a polyglot Australian origin and a repeated black intervention in an otherwise sanitised Australian history. In the case of Tom Conquit there is a confluence of black African American and Aboriginal lineages, which is possibly less unique than first thought. Wherever there were sailors there were black seamen. And wherever there was coerced labour there was inevitably a black presence. Of convicts sent to Australia between 1:160 and 1:200 were persons of colour.<sup>28</sup> This contribution has been largely ignored or denied, yet out of the Randall and Martin connections alone, where Tom Conquit originates, there is believed by their descendants to be over 27,000 relations living in Australia today.

And that of course does not take into account the considerable additional Aboriginal contribution to Australian cultural formation. While Australians have now awakened to the savagery of invasion, less is known of the early Aboriginal contribution, voluntary or otherwise, to the Australian mainstream (white) population. In a sense, Australians burdened with the stain of convictism did not require, in the heightened atmospherics of late nineteenth century racism, to

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<sup>27</sup> G. A. Wood, 'Convicts', *The Royal Australian Historical Society: Journal and Proceedings*, Vol. 8, No. 4, 1922, pp. 177-208; R. Ward, *The Australian Legend*, Melbourne, 1958.

<sup>28</sup> Cassandra Pybus estimates 1:160, while Ian Duffield, places a more conservative estimate of 1:200. The discrepancy lies in their interpretations of descriptions in the Convict Indents. P. Gilroy *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, London, 1993, p. 13, suggests that a quarter of all seamen in the late 1700s were of black African origin.

move into nationhood with the additional 'burden' of colour. Any hint of black origin was erased with vigour and determination. Even now, in the twenty first century, with people in hot pursuit of convict origins there is reluctance, even resistance, to Aboriginal or African American origin. Everyone in the family lineages explored admitted to some or other relative who vehemently opposed disclosure of black heritage. Yet this motley past is the Australian heritage, and one established well before modern multiculturalism.

While the convict past has been constantly punctuated with stories of struggle against adversity and ultimate triumph and success, the story of Tom Conquit tells the more common tale of misfortune and an inability to escape oppression. There is no nobility, no heroics, simply a pointlessness and parody of purpose, that few want to hear. Like the town of Adelong itself today, bypassed by more important preoccupations, these stories remain like museum pieces little altered, preserving, as the earth does, the unmarked graves of Thomas Conquit and his mother in the local cemetery. His voice, like a prophet, emanated from an outback wilderness and spoke of tears, of death, systematic extermination and genocidal intent, of resistance and a blessed spirituality. But the words were garbled with madness and the content of his message was unintelligible then, and struggles for understanding even today.