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## **Torres Strait Islands 1900-1960**

In 1595 a Spanish voyage set off to find their captains belief of a southern land that could be claimed by the great Spanish empire, but this voyage would not make it to this believed land as this journey was racked by a mutinies crew which lead to the accidentally discovery of the Torres strait Islands by their second in command Luis de Torres in 1606 and the landing and claimant of Papua New Guinea (Brett Hilder, 1980). At first there is a universal drive to think that the Torres Strait Islander people had the same experience as the Aboriginals on the mainland but there is a great difference to the experience with the first landing. This essay will examine the difference in the treatment of the Torres Strait people by the government from the first arrival in 1606 by the Spanish and the mainland Aboriginal people's first arrival in 1770 by. It will show that while there was a major difference in the years of their discovery, over 100 years, the treatment of government was still in-human to all involved especially during 1900 and 1960. The major world events during this time helped shape what we view as discriminatory and brought the unfairness in major treatments to a fortunate end with the viewing of Torres Strait Islanders and the Australian Aboriginals as people not animals.

### **1904-1936**

Since the first settlement white men tried to integrate the Aboriginal culture into western society but in 1904 Reverend Walker established the idea of the local people owning a company boat for the intention to increase trades in the Islands. When the Reverend passed away the Queensland Government began to exert more influence on the Islanders' lives. So, the government supported a scheme in 1904 where it allowed and encouraged the restrictions on the savings accounts and movements of islanders (Beckett above n 2 45-47). This idea also restricted the movement from the Islands to mainland Australia. This notion was to restrict the Aboriginal and Islanders because in 1912 the Queensland Government gazetted 22,000 acres across the Torres Strait with the intention for it to be Indigenous reserves (Queensland Government Gazette, vol.99, no.138, 1912, 1330.). By 1918 a Protector of the Aboriginals was allowed under the 1920s and 1930s racial legislation to remove Islanders to relocate them to reserves and missions across Queensland. Whilst the removals of the Islanders did not have the extent of the Aboriginals on the mainland seventeen removals were documented between 1939 and 1950. During this time the number of Torres Strait Islanders increased their ownerships of ships and with the initial slavery in 1879 the great Australian pearl industry began.

### **1879 & 1936**

Pearling had become one of Australia's largest industries in the Far North coast of Queensland as it all began in the 1860's with the marine industry. Pearling kicked off in the 1870's where the local people of Tutu island adorned themselves with the pearls and the Pacific traders who had depleted their stocks of sandalwood and whales became interested, So, Tutu island became a well-known stomping ground for the pearls. The colony of Queensland recognised the future profit and to utilise the rule of the islands they forced an annex of the islands to Queensland in 1879 but the few government officials who were stationed in the far north soon became financially interested in the profit of the new pearl industry and due to the remoteness

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of the islands the idea of settlement was slow, the officials considered the Indigenous people as a “undeveloped resource” (Regina Ganter, 1994).

The people with European descent-built ships for the fortune and due to the idea that the Indigenous people were an ‘undeveloped resource’ formalised the forced labour of them, as the job of diving was dangerous with a 10% death rate compared to Queensland's death rate of 1.1%. A very well-known ship owner (pearler) was Harry Hunt he was later found out to be a slave owner and due to the thought that the Indigenous people were a ‘undeveloped resource’ it brought out slave traders who would round up the local people they were otherwise known as blackbirders ‘...Publicly advertised themselves to procure and put niggers aboard at five pounds a head or anybody, or shoot them for the Government at half a crown a piece.’ (Collins, 2018) and these blackbirders would force them to work for the Pearlmen by demanding them to dive into the deep waters off the island. They also forced pregnant women to dive. These Women were preferred as they were believed to have a larger lung capacity to dive. The dives were conducted with no equipment so the dive was very dangerous and unfortunately the pearlmen would not pay the Indigenous people as they were slaves but they would pay the other workers. The Pearl industry in the Torres Strait was hit with a strike in 1936 which brought a major decline in profit which flagged the Queensland government's attention.

## **Maritime Strike, 1936**

With the jumping out of windows and 70% of islanders refusing to man the 25 company boats in the area the Maritime Strike began in 1936 and lasted 9 months. This strike seemed to have caught the Queensland Administration for the protection of Aborigines by surprise. The Government had increased their restrictions on Indigenous independence with owning and operating of their own luggers to the near impossibility of ownership. With the local Protector McLean enforcing an evening curfew, for efficiency, there was belief that the strike was initially caused by the miserable pay for the government owned luggers and the payment of credit in the Government-sponsored stores (Nonie Sharp, 1982). McLean was removed from his post as he could not settle the workers, Anglican Church, the Bishop, Thursday Island shopkeepers, traders, and townspeople. Because of this removal the State of Queensland sent up another protector O’Leary who had managed to listen to the islands protest and succeeded in abolishing the curfew, achieved greater autonomy over company boat transactions, procured more freedom for their day-to-day activities without the infringement from government officials, received higher wages in money (not credit) for work, and were released from the Protection system. O’Leary admitted that many of McLean’s policies and practices were not popular. “I am adopting the attitude of not appealing to any man to join a 'Company' boat.” (Noni Sharp, 1993). The success of O’Leary’s new laws at the end of 1936 Maritime Strikes, paved the way for a new legislation which allowed the many powers of the government; teachers, the Aboriginal Industries Board, and the Protectors to be moved to the local Island Councils and communities in 1939.

## **1939**

Whilst the removal of the Indigenous people from their homeland was popular on Australia's mainland the new legislation passed in the Torres Strait became a major factor in the traditions kept in the Islands today. This legislation in 1939 allowed the powers of Governments to be transferred to the island councils. This was different to the previous Queensland protection Act

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1897. The previous act grouped the Aboriginals and Torres Strait people as one and allowed their current protector to remove any indigenous from any reserve to another reserve or to a reserve under the Aboriginals Act 1939 and kept there but because of the amended act in 1939 (Torres Strait Islander Act.) the Torres strait became independent from the mainland aboriginal and 'No such removal shall be effected without the recommendation of the Island court'.(Torres Strait Islanders Act. 3Geo. VI. No. 7) This Act. may have saved the Islanders in some devastation in the loss of culture especially with comparing cultures and stories today but they were still injustices committed by Australian Governments not just the state governments. When the World Wars began There was a major uproar within many communities about the injustices of the governments especially when the effects of the World Wars came to the forefront of everyone's mind.

## **WW1 & WW2 1939-1945**

During WW1 the Aboriginal people were barred from enlisting as they were not “substantially of European origin or descent”. They still allowed people to sneak through for cannon fodder, they looked “White” enough and the relaxation of recruitments to meet their recruitment targets towards the end of the War in which allowed approximately 400 Aboriginals to join in the war. There is no true recount on how many Indigenous served in the wars but WW2 Had an estimate of 4000 people and about 850 people were of Torres Strait Islander descent. The Indigenous people have served this country's army all the way from the 1880's -The Boer Wars, both World Wars and to Afghanistan. They served and defended the people of Australia and for many the first time being treated as equals on the battlefield ‘...We're not citizens, yet we're willing to die for this place, we're willing to die for non-Indigenous Australians, have a think about that one....’(Gary Oakley, 2016). Unfortunately, they may have been treated as equals on the battlefield from the army with equal pay and respect, as soon as they came back to Australia the discrimination against them would rear its ugly head. The white soldiers were allowed to enter RSL's and apply for grants for farm land, where the Indigenous people would not be allowed to access any of these services. They also were forced off the reserve lands where they had lived, to free up the land for the white soldiers returning home. Most were also required to give up their pay or take a cut due to their States protection act. When the Islanders committed to enlisting 850 of their capable men and women to the World Wars it was considered quite high as their population was only in the thousands and these men had later become known as the Torres Strait Light Infantry Battalion.

The Torres Strait Light Infantry Battalion were respected soldiers in the force, however these men only received one third of the pay compared to what was given to the white Australian soldiers. So on 30th of December 1943, influenced by the Maritime Strikes three Torres Strait Infantry companies went on strike calling for equal pay and equal rights. Premier Smith argued to the Prime Minister 'It is considered that if these allowances were granted, voluntary enlistment of Thursday Island men would be encouraged if it be decided to proceed with further enlistments. A large percentage of them has a dependent mother, father or some other relative and it is characteristic of this race that they consistently support their dependents.' (Smith, 1941) because of this refusal of a pay raise they simply remained in their quarters and refused to do anything the commanding officers asked so after three days the sit-in ceased with their company Major speaking to them about passing their request up the chain of command. The pay rise request went through on the 1st of February 1944 but only with a raise of two-thirds of the white soldiers pay and these men did not get this money until 1986 with full entitlements.

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With this pay rise the Battalion was the last to be stationed on the Torres Strait and by 1946 the unit was slowly disbanded. The hard work of these people allowed the Australian government to see the positives of their work ethics and allowed them to come into Australia for the pursuit of employment in 1947.

Australia's Mining industry began to boom in the 1960's, and when the Torres Strait Islanders were allowed on the mainland for work, they became one of the major labour contenders within its time. The local Indigenous and the Torres Strait people spread out throughout all of the states to bring Australia to its famous "rail time" (Shino Konishi & Leah Lui-Chivizhe, 2014). This rail time was bought through cheap menial labour of the major forces, Ingenious people but this time was also commended in the local areas for its boom in work availability, pay and the chance to travel (Anna Shnukal, 2001). With the popularity of the Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders in the 1960's in the work boom, the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Torres Strait Island Studies 'AIATSIS' was established in June was intended to be a Statutory Authority by the parliament. These treatments still haven't changed but have gotten better since the referendum in 1967.

The Torres Strait people were discovered by accident in the late 1600's and only got recognised fairly recently as citizens. The 100-year difference between each settlement each Aboriginal generation has their trauma and lost culture the Torres Strait Island people '...have always remained on our homelands and our culture and traditions have continued relatively intact. We have not experienced the same dislocation from our traditional lands as that suffered by Aboriginal people...' Torres Strait Islander Advisory Board, Strategic Plan, 1998. With the major events from 1900-1960 outlined in this essay it shows that view and rule was discriminatory and brought the major unfairness in the treatments of the indigenous. In this decade the viewing of Torres Strait Islanders and the Australian Aboriginals as animals has started to come to a fortunate end.