



CHAPTER I

COLONISTS AND CONVICTS

In the first days of August 1914, the young nation of Australia was electrified to find itself, with the rest of the British Empire, at war with Germany. The thousands of Australian men who rushed to enlist in the armed services in the first weeks of the war included a few individuals who were destined to make special marks on their country's history. In Western Australia, two rural working men would emerge from obscurity to place themselves among Australia's greatest soldiers: Percy Black, a prospector from the Yilgarn goldfields, and Henry (Harry) Murray, a timber contractor from the forests of the south-west.

Percy Black's family had been established in Australia since the mid- nineteenth century. His parents, William John Black and Ann Longmore, were both from County Antrim, Ulster, and were almost certainly members of the extensive Scottish Presbyterian culture in Ulster.¹ The horror of the Potato Famine had struck Ireland in the 1840s with around a million deaths from starvation and related diseases. Another two million Irish people emigrated during and after the famine period. Although the Ulster counties suffered slightly less from the famine than the nation as a whole, their loss through

emigration was just as high. The majority made their way to America, but William Black and Anne Longmore chose the Australian colony of Victoria as their destination.

It is not clear whether William and Anne had met at the time they embarked for the Antipodes, and the details of their voyage and arrival are also not known. They were in Victoria when they married in 1856, however, and the couple took up a rural life. The district around Ballan, roughly seventy kilometres west of Melbourne, had been opened up by the von Stieglitz family (of Irish extraction despite their Teutonic name) in the late 1830s. The area was rich farming country, particularly suitable for sheep; the Blacks obtained a property in the locality of Beremboke, a little south of the Ballan town site, and set about establishing their farm and raising a family.

The Blacks raised fourteen children,² the eleventh of these being a boy born on 12 December 1877 and given the names Percy Charles Herbert. The Black children grew up in the outdoor life of the sparsely populated district. By 1870 there were enough people around Beremboke for the Victorian government to approve the establishment of a tiny one-classroom school, of which the four eldest Black siblings were original pupils. The youngest son Percy attended the school in his turn, receiving the solid basic education that was becoming available to most children in the Australian colonies. As they reached adulthood, several of the young Blacks moved away from the farm and took on other occupations. No less than four of Percy's older brothers (Hugh, Samuel, Robert and Joseph) joined the Victorian police force, although Hugh later left under some sort of cloud. Percy himself seems to have become a carpenter after leaving school, but where he plied his trade is not known. Not far from Beremboke was the locality of Mount Egerton, where gold had been discovered in the 1850s. Although Ballarat, thirty kilometres further west, was far better known as one of the focal points of the Victorian gold rushes, the Mount Egerton deposit proved to be quite lucrative. The



William John Black and Anne (Longmore) Black.

(Courtesy Ballan Shire Historical Society)

original strike evolved into a mechanised underground operation (the shaft eventually went to a depth of over 600 metres) and it is possible that the young Percy Black developed an interest in goldmining from his proximity to the mine.

Certainly it was gold that took him to the other side of the continent to seek his fortune. The economies of the eastern colonies sank into depression during the 1890s, coinciding with a remarkable series of gold discoveries in Western Australia. The western colony was inundated with a huge rush of gold seekers from overseas and from the east of the continent. From Victoria alone, 75,000 people made their way west between 1895 and 1900, and by 1901 it was estimated that two-thirds of the West Australian population had been born elsewhere.³ Some time around the turn of the century Percy Black, in his mid-twenties, decided to join the exodus. With a friend named John Hughes,⁴ he set off westwards.

Established in 1829, the Western Australian colony, comprising a third of the continent, made only slow progress in its first sixty years. The first discoveries of gold in the 1880s changed all that: as the immigrants began flooding in and the sluggish economy boomed. The initial rushes had subsided by the time the young carpenter from Beremboke arrived, but there was still money to be made in many of the diggings. Percy Black probably travelled by ship from Victoria — the trans-Australia railway was not completed until 1917 — although a few remarkable characters actually walked across the continent to join the search for gold. Travellers by ship usually landed at Albany in the south of the state (the Fremantle harbour improvements were only completed in the early 1900s), and from there made their way inland to reach the goldfields. Railways were being extended from Perth to the closer gold diggings at about this time, but a variety of other means were used — horses, camels, bicycles or simply walking, perhaps pushing a wheelbarrow with one's belongings.

Percy Black initially headed for the coincidentally named Black Range area of the East Murchison goldfield, about 600 kilometres north-east of Perth. This area was prospected in the late 1890s, but significant finds were not reported until 1903, and it was probably then that Black and Hughes made their way to the area. No details can be found of their activities at Black Range but presumably they led the normal life of small prospectors. Having pegged out and registered a lease, they would have established a camp and set about trying to extract the elusive metal by a variety of methods. Most common for the arid goldfields of the west was 'dryblowing' — in the non-mechanical version, small quantities of dirt and crushed rock were allowed to fall between two dishes so that the breeze blew away the lighter particles, leaving the heavier gold (if there was any) to collect in the lower container. More sophisticated methods included mechanical 'batteries' to crush the ore and extract the gold. Although these were expensive, small fossickers could have their ore treated by paying a fee to the battery owner. Some groups could finance shaft mining, and a few people had the capital to establish large operations. Life on the diggings was hard and primitive, although supplies, drink and a few luxuries were usually available in the townships that sprang up almost overnight near the diggings, such as Nungarra and Sandstone at Black Range.

The level of Percy Black's success on the Murchison can only be guessed at. Certainly he didn't make his fortune, but it is reasonable to assume that he was able to get some sort of living from his various claims. In any event, as the emphasis shifted from the small prospectors to a few big operations, he decided it was time to move on. Whatever the results of his first venture into prospecting, he was sufficiently encouraged to continue the search for gold. He took up a number of leases in various districts, including several at Mount Margaret, and in about 1908 moved further south to the

Yilgarn goldfields. There he established a claim at Mount Jackson, about a hundred kilometres north of Southern Cross, the main town of the area. He seems to have had several partners in the venture (including Hughes), probably operating a shaft mine rather than dryblowing — in 1914 he was quoted as saying that the mine had its own battery for ore-crushing, so the partners seem to have had access to some capital. It appears that Black found it necessary, however, to work for wages as well: a photograph from 1912 shows him as a member of an underground shift at the big ‘company’ mine at Bullfinch, thirty-five kilometres from Southern Cross.

The township of Bullfinch formed a centre for the sparse population of the area to the north of Southern Cross, and Black played a part in the civic life of the community. He became an official of the Bullfinch Sports Committee, with the duties of Starter, and he was a member of the Bullfinch Rifle Club — later he would be recognised as a superb shot. He was also a member of the Bullfinch Miners’ Union. Although he was no teetotaller, the indications are that Black was a man of moderate habits, quiet and unassuming but with an underlying toughness that was suited to the hard life of the goldfields. Percy Black remained a bachelor all his life, but at some point he established a relationship with a woman, of whom all that is known comes from a couple of surviving letters, signed only with her initial and surname, M Cassidy. In one letter she stated that she had never seen Bullfinch, so they may have met at one of the larger towns, or perhaps on one of Black’s trips to Perth — she was certainly living in Perth in 1915.

By 1914 then, Percy Black was established as a fairly typical citizen of the Western Australian goldfields, not overly distinguished perhaps, but (in C E W Bean’s phrase) ‘known from Yilgarn to the Murchison’. He was in his thirty-seventh year when he filled out his enlistment papers, five feet nine inches tall and a trim 150 pounds in weight, measuring 41



Bullfinch Sports Committee, 1912. Percy Black is second from the right at the rear. Bert Longmore is third from the right in the front row.

(Courtesy Batty Library, Item 005662D)

inches around the chest. Although not much more than medium size, he had a reputation for great physical strength, and his only health problem seems to have been poor teeth — examined by army doctors in September 1914, his fitness was endorsed as ‘subject to extraction of stumps’. With his blue eyes and dark hair, and a luxuriant drooping moustache, he was thought to bear a superficial resemblance to General Lord Kitchener, Britain’s hero of the Battle of Omdurman and soon the face of the ‘Your Country Needs You’ poster — ‘with the same weather-beaten complexion, strong brows, heavy dark moustache, square jaw, but not quite so full in the face, and with lines more sensitive.’⁵

Harry Murray, the other protagonist of this story, was also of Scottish extraction, although his antecedents followed a somewhat different path to become established in Australia. In September 1786, a young Scotsman named Kennedy Murray was arrested in Glasgow on a charge of petty theft. Characterised as ‘a person of bad fame and character’, he was sentenced to transportation to the colonies. After some time in local prison, the twenty-five-year-old Murray embarked in 1791 on a convict ship bound for the penal colony of New South Wales, established only three years earlier. Arriving at Port Jackson early the next year, Murray remained in the colony until 1796, when he was one of a draft of convicts transferred to Norfolk Island, the beautiful speck in the Pacific claimed by Britain at about the same time as the Port Jackson landings. Norfolk Island did not yet have its reputation as a convict hell-hole (‘the worst place in the English-speaking world’, in Robert Hughes’ phrase)⁶ but conditions were arduous and primitive for both convicts and guards, and the discipline was certainly brutal.

Here Kennedy Murray encountered Anne White, another transported convict who had also been convicted of theft. At the age of seventeen she had been sent out with the Second

Fleet in 1790, and had been on Norfolk Island since November 1791. The two soon formed a relationship, and in August 1799 Anne gave birth to their son, also named Kennedy. By 1802, their sentences had expired and their relationship had broken down. Kennedy Murray Senior returned to the mainland, but Anne White stayed on Norfolk Island until 1813 with her son, by which time she had taken up with another former convict and borne more children. With the closing down of the Norfolk Island colony in 1813, she and her blended family moved to the new colony of Van Diemen’s Land, the future Tasmania.

The younger Kennedy Murray came to exemplify the phenomenon of Australian convict settlement — the transformation of the convicts’ usually illegitimate ‘currency’ children into solid, law-abiding industrious pioneers within a single generation. Kennedy Murray Junior, with two convicted petty thieves as parents, plus another convict for a stepfather, founded an extensive family of respectable citizens — including a grandson who would become one of the great heroes of the British Empire. In 1820, Kennedy was granted a tract of farmland in the Evandale district, a little south of Launceston in northern Van Diemen’s Land.⁷ He steadily expanded his property and built a fine residence that he named, with justifiable pride in his success, Prosperous House. Kennedy Murray Junior married twice and fathered no less than seventeen children. His first child by his second wife, Hannah Goodall, was a son, Edward Kennedy Murray, born in 1840.

When Kennedy Murray Junior died in 1860, an obituary described him as a man of ‘most industrious habits’ and ‘of a generous and obliging disposition’. His son Edward Kennedy Murray, apparently a man of less affable personality than his father, also became a farmer, acquiring another Evandale property that he named Woodstock. Portraits show Edward as a man of impressive appearance, with a strong face and a luxuriant beard. He married the dignified, intelligent Clarissa

Little, and the couple had nine children. Their eighth child and youngest son was born on 1 December 1880, and christened Henry William, although he would be best known by his nickname 'Harry'.

Growing up in northern Tasmania, as Van Diemen's Land was called after 1855, the young farm boy attended the government school at Evandale with his siblings. There is a story that he would often frighten his sisters when crossing a bridge on the way to school by walking along the handrail. Young Murray left school at thirteen or fourteen, apparently against his preference, under pressure from his father to help out on the farm. His older brothers had been allowed to continue their education, and this seems to have been one of several sources of an ongoing resentment against his father. He appears to have been a keen learner, and many of the references in his later writings point to a far wider reading than would be expected from a basic schooling. His clever, erudite mother no doubt contributed to his education also.

At some point the family took up another property, known as Northcote, near St Leonards. On New Year's Day 1901, the six separate colonies became a single nation, the federated states of the Commonwealth of Australia. The following year, the 22-year-old Harry Murray had his first taste of military life, joining the part-time militia of the Launceston Volunteer Artillery. He remained with this unit for six years, establishing a reputation as a crack rifle shot — he would have had plenty of practice on the farm — and experiencing what he later described as a very strict standard of discipline. By 1908, he was looking for a change of scene and a fresh start. His father had died in 1904, and the viability of the family farm was declining. Two of his older brothers, Albert and Charles (and later a sister, Marion), had already moved to Western Australia, and now he decided to follow them.

At about the same time as Percy Black was relocating from the Murchison goldfields to Mount Jackson, Harry Murray



Edward Kennedy Murray and Clarissa (Little) Murray.
(Courtesy R Murray)

arrived in Western Australia, probably also by ship at Fremantle or Albany. His brother Charles, ten years Harry's senior, had established himself in the west some years earlier.⁸ The oldest Murray brother, Albert, was also in Western Australia, where he had followed several occupations, including running the Kanowna hotel on the goldfields and later managing Meeberrie station on the Murchison River. Charles Murray originally came west in 1890 or 1891 with the intention of taking up work in a sawmill, but the lure of the goldfields took over. He was among those who walked from Albany to the goldfields, in his case to Southern Cross before following the railway line further east. With some prospecting, Charles Murray accumulated enough funds to start a cartage contracting business, transporting supplies by horse-drawn wagon to outlying diggings in the north-eastern goldfields between Leonora and Laverton, such places as Mount Morgans, Red Flag and Hawk's Nest.

When his younger brother Harry showed up looking for a job, Charles took him on in the cartage business, where he seems to have worked for some time. Harry Murray's private memoirs include an account of an incident that occurred when he was carting stores to an isolated gold mine, and a 1917 newspaper article mentioned that he had worked at Morgans and Hawk's Nest, although without saying what he was doing there. At some point also — it is not clear whether this was before or after joining his brother's business — Murray set himself up as a courier, carrying gold and mail by bicycle between outer diggings and the railheads. Bicycles were used extensively for personal transport and communications on the goldfields at this time, and although the heyday of the famous cycle mail service had ceased by about 1900 with the coming of the railways, there were apparently some niches where a demand still existed. Murray contracted for the run from Kookynie (about 160 kilometres north of Kalgoorlie) to a mine at Linden, on the edge of Lake Carey, a

round trip of about 330 kilometres.⁹ The back areas were crisscrossed with camel pads, the firm trails formed by the plodding camel caravans that carried the heavier loads from the railway to the outer camps, and these made fine cycle tracks. Many years later, Murray wrote of his regular trips on the lonely tracks, and the danger from hostile Aborigines and 'bad lads with white hides', as he put it. He discouraged interference by '[letting] loungers see what I could do with the .32 carbine I carried.'

The work did not have a long-term future, although it may well have been quite profitable while it lasted — expenses would have been low, and the bicycle couriers charged substantial fees; a shilling per mile per item was not unusual. It was probably a decline in the diggings on his route that caused Murray to take up work with his brother Charles again.¹⁰ Charles had moved his business to Comet Vale, about ninety-five kilometres north of Kalgoorlie and thirty kilometres south of Menzies. There were a couple of mines operating at Comet Vale, but Charles Murray's interest in the region was in wood rather than gold. The gold rushes had created an enormous demand for timber. Apart from domestic requirements for cooking and heating, structural timbers were used for propping the mine shafts and passageways, and as fuel for the steam engines powering the mine machinery, the winches and ore-processing furnaces. Wood also provided charcoal for gas-producer engines running the small prospectors' batteries. The remarkable goldfields pipeline, completed in 1903 to bring water 600 kilometres from Perth, used wood-fuelled steam pumps to keep the water flowing. Charles Murray, among many others, took up the business of supplying this insatiable demand.

Despite its sparse rainfall, the goldfields region was quite thickly forested at the beginning of the gold rush period. Scores of different species of eucalypts and acacias are native to the

region, but the voracious appetite of the towns and mines resulted in huge areas being cut over, to an extent that is horrifying to present-day environmental thinking (later conservation policies have resulted in a recovery of the vegetation). The woodcutters worked outwards from the numerous sidings along the railway lines around Kalgoorlie, building private narrow-gauge tramways out to fresh areas as the nearer trees were cleared. Joining his brother's operation based at Comet Vale, Harry Murray was put to work cutting timber, and had to quickly adjust to life on the 'woodlines', living in isolated camps and working from dawn to dusk in the heat and dust.

It was hard, exhausting work with axe and crosscut saw, attacking some of the toughest tree species on earth. An old hand commented that he had seen 'quite a few cases of the "new chum" coming onto the woodline and losing the use of his axe on the first day. Unless an old hand had warned him, the newcomer could easily sharpen his axe to a fine point, swing it at a salmon gum and take out a sizeable chunk — not from the tree he was cutting, but from the axe head itself.'¹¹ Tools had to be purchased and replaced by the woodcutters themselves, usually on credit from the wood company's store. Purchases of clothing, small food items, personal effects and so forth were also debited against their meagre pay, and the workers often found themselves working for not much more than their keep. Harry Murray seems to have stuck with this for a year or two — he was registered on the electoral roll for 1911 as 'woodcutter, Comet Vale', and wrote to his sister from there in 1912 — but eventually he decided that he was getting nowhere, and began to look around for something else.

He travelled back to Tasmania to spend Christmas of 1912 with his family, returning to Western Australia in the new year to work in the great forests of the south-west. Here the local economy revolved around the timber industry, and a particularly important part of this was the production of

railway sleepers. These were in high demand for both export and local railways, including the Trans Australia then under construction. The wood of the huge jarrah trees around the townships of Dwellingup and neighbouring Holyoake was ideal for sleepers, and the industry supported several thousand people in the region. Various sawmills were engaged in sleeper production, but those of the best quality came from hewers working with manual tools deep in the bush. Harry Murray was able to set himself up as a carting contractor in the area, collecting the sleepers produced by a team of those tough bushmen, for transport to the railway siding and sale to the users; it appears that he employed the hewers as subcontractors. The seven-foot long sleepers were cut from felled trees with a broadaxe, and it took great skill trimming them into perfect shape for the approval of the government inspectors. It was hard work, more so than working in the local sawmills, and the pay was not as good, but the sleeper hewers were the type of men who preferred the freedom and independence of the forest life.¹² In later years, after he had achieved distinction, Murray was often described as a sleeper cutter, but is unlikely that he did much hewing himself — he gave his occupation as sleeper *carter* on the local electoral roll. As an experienced bushman and a former goldfields woodcutter however, he would have been a handy man with an axe.¹³

The hewers would spend several weeks working through an area before taking a break at one or another of the small townships to let off steam, usually involving some hard drinking (although Murray himself did not drink at this time in his life). Home for the sleeper cutters and the various contractors was usually a large tented camp set up near the railway line, and a number of these were established at different locations as the cutters moved on to fresh patches. In 1914 Murray was living at Smith's Camp near Holyoake, at the twenty-six mile mark of the local railway. He was probably a member of the South-West Timber Hewers Co-operative

Society (the 'Teddy Bears') and an article in the *Westralian Worker* of March 1917 says that he was also a member of the Timber Workers' Union, which may date from his woodcutting days at Comet Vale.

Possessed of a great inner strength and a quiet self-confidence in practical matters, Murray was also a very reticent man. Although known and respected in the district, he does not seem to have achieved any particular distinction or taken much of a part in the lively social life of the community, which tended to revolve around the frequent dances held in the local halls. As well as his shyness, Murray had the misfortune to be tone-deaf, and was, not surprisingly, a non-dancer. He would thus have been at a considerable disadvantage in meeting eligible women. Harry Murray was approaching thirty-four years old in August 1914; he was yet to find his true path in life, no doubt becoming increasingly restless and discontented. This would all change with the arrival of the news from Europe that his country was at war.

Australia was reasonably well informed about international events. Recently completed undersea cables allowed transmission of telegraphed news stories from Europe, and the capital city daily newspapers could have up to date information within a day or so of its appearance overseas. Scores of local newspapers in the bush towns, avidly read in the absence of other communication media, picked up such stories as well. Most Australians were therefore aware of the international tensions that had been building in Europe in previous years, and of the bellicose attitudes of Germany and Austria towards their neighbours. They had noted the crisis resulting from the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria by a Serbian extremist on 28 June 1914. Nevertheless, it was only in the last few days before these events reached their climax that it began to dawn on the British peoples that they were about to become involved in a major war.¹⁴ On 4 August, faithful to her formal and informal alliances, Great Britain declared war on



A typical sleeper-hewers' camp in south-west Western Australia, c. 1914.
(Courtesy H McMeekin and R Richards)

Germany, and the announcement struck Australia like a thunderbolt.

The Australian reaction was astonishing, with an instant outpouring of enthusiasm and almost hysterical patriotism. The leader of the Federal Opposition, Andrew Fisher, promised Australian support for the mother country 'to the last man and the last shilling.' Newspapers generally welcomed the war as an opportunity for the new nation to prove its worth, and editorialised against the brutal aggression of the Central Powers. Recruiting for an Australian force commenced almost immediately, and men from all over the country rushed to enlist. Their motivation is difficult to be sure of at this distance in time: a young man's desire for adventure was certainly part of it, to share in the glories of war that many of them had read about at school, in particular British glories. The desire for their new nation to take its place as a full member of the British Empire, proving itself in blood, was surely present in many, as was the simpler inclination to help a friend in need. Economic conditions were of some importance also. In Western Australia, the effects of drought and increasing unemployment were beginning to bite, and the guarantee of 'six bob a day' was a factor (the daily rate of pay for a private soldier was set at six shillings, far in excess of what a British 'Tommy' was paid). These were some of the more obvious reasons for the rush to enlist, but no doubt there were many more affecting each man who came forward, not least of which was the strong underlying patriotism — felt for both Australia and the Empire — of most of the citizens.

Army recruiting offices in the capital cities were soon swamped, and more than enough recruits were obtained to fill the initial quotas. Volunteers continued to make their way to the capitals from the bush areas, many delayed by distance but determined to make their mark. From Bullfinch in the Yilgarn came Percy Black, one of more than a hundred men from that tiny community who enlisted. He left his partners to manage

their mine, and headed off with a quiet determination to play his part in what was to come. Down in the south-west forests, Harry Murray wound up his sleeper business and set off to enlist also, following hundreds of other timber workers, many of whom literally downed tools and jumped on the first train for Perth — their rusting broadaxes could be found lying in the bush after the war. The motives of Murray and Black were probably much the same as those of their contemporaries, although they were older by ten years than most of the first volunteers. Percy Black also felt that it was his place to represent his family in the Empire's struggle — he was the youngest of the brothers (even he was approaching the maximum enlistment age) and had fewer commitments. It is difficult not to speculate also that both men instinctively recognised the opportunity to discover their own untapped capacities. These first began to emerge at the army's Blackboy Hill training camp in September 1914.