

Experiments in Self-determination: Histories of the Outstation Movement in Australia

edited by Nicolas Peterson and Fred Myers

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What was 'self-determination'? Is 'was' the right tense? Historians and others are beginning to treat 'self-determination' as a discernibly bounded period in public policy, a sequel to 'assimilation' which was a sequel to 'protection'. The subsidised formation of outstations has been one of the more obvious ways in which Aborigines sought greater autonomy within the settler colony. To move away from settlements and missions and back onto ancestral homelands (or 'outstations') seemed paradigmatic of 'self-determination'.

We have reason to think that 'self-determination' began around 1973–74 in the Whitlam Government's Aboriginal affairs policies and terminated around 2004–07, when the Australian Government extinguished the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC), amended the *Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976* unilaterally, placed new conditions on public expenditure (including welfare benefits) in Aboriginal communities judged to be 'dysfunctional', and reoriented the Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) policy towards the graduation of the welfare-dependent into what some called 'real jobs'.

Another element in this package of changes was that the Australian Government in 2007 transferred responsibility for outstations to the Northern Territory Government. As most outstations are in the Territory, this put fiscal pressure on what has always been a state-subsidised 'experiment in self-determination'.

This book of 16 chapters historicises the outstation movement as the moment when two histories intersected: the history of remote and very remote Aborigines' ambivalent response to the opportunities and pressures of their colonised condition, and the history of the settler colonists' ideologies and practices of guardianship.

The latter is the easier history to grasp and to polemicise about. An optimistic policy ideology – increasingly vulnerable to doubts – sustained the 30 years of self-determination. Peter Sutton in 2009 called it the 'liberal consensus'.¹ This ideological formation credited Indigenous Australians with certain capacities for self-governance that 'assimilation' had eroded and/or obscured. Released from the paternalistic authority of governments and missions, Indigenous Australians, empowered partly by recognition of their customary land tenure, would choose the degree and manner of their accommodation to colonising Australian institutions.

The intersecting history – how Indigenous Australians were responding to the hazards and affordances of the colonial order – is the more difficult to write. This book will help us write it, because most of its contributors have been witnesses and fellow travellers. Many of the authors draw on field notes written at or soon after the 1970s initiatives of the outstation movement. However, they look back through the lens of recent debate about whether the experiment has benefited Aboriginal Australians.

The editors and some contributors acknowledge the current influence of the arguments of Helen Hughes and Gary Johns that outstations have been a failure, to be remedied by encouraging the aggregation of the remote Indigenous population in centres large enough to create economies of scale in the provision of public services (health, education, policing).² Mike Dillon and Neil Westbury, noting census evidence that very remote Aborigines already find such remote townships attractive, have argued that governments have been structurally disengaged from remote and very remote Indigenous communities, large and small, to such a degree that in remote Australia we are witness to a 'failed state'.³ Their 2007 indictment included the argument that some elements of government policy that had seemed to be steps towards 'self-determination' – making ATSIC responsible for certain programs, allowing communities to choose to receive CDEP funds instead of unemployment benefits – were in effect central to the state's failure to engage. Certain experiments in Indigenous autonomy were, in effect, essays in state irresponsibility. This argument raises the difficult

1 Sutton 2009: 17. I have discussed Sutton's account of the substance and the vulnerability of the 'liberal consensus' in Rowse 2013: 152–56.

2 Hughes 2007: *passim*; Johns 2011: 253–54.

3 Dillon and Westbury 2007: 30–49.

question of how public policy could renew and elevate government engagement with remote and very remote Indigenous Australians while leaving scope for them to choose the manner and degree of their engagement with Australia's economic and political institutions.

Some critics of 'self-determination' policy have pointed to the profound challenge –for a settler-colonial liberal capitalist nation-state such as Australia – of 'self-determination', understood as 'the right to political autonomy, the freedom to determine political status and to freely pursue economic, social and cultural development' which may or may not be effected through 'separate statehood'.⁴ Indigenous lawyer Larissa Behrendt points to the not impossible steps that Australia would have to take to operationalise 'Aboriginal sovereignty': entrenching a bill of rights in the Constitution; strengthening native title; institutionalising Indigenous processes of collective decision-making; increasing expenditure on services to remote and very remote Australia.⁵ For Marcia Langton, such rights-based perspectives give too little emphasis to two linked ways that Indigenous Australians can and should act in their own interests: commit to education and gain employment in the industries that have attracted public and private investment in remote Australia.⁶

Because remote and very remote regions of Australia continue to figure as the critical case in these diverse considerations of what is possible for Indigenous Australians, the book under review is pertinent. That is, what made the outstation movement 'experimental' was that (1) it suspended belief in the hitherto assumed model of Indigenous futures: that aggregated, sedentary residence is essential to acculturation to the demands and opportunities of mainstream Australian institutions, and (2) it shifted agency from settler-colonial authority to Indigenous localised leaders and a new breed of white men and women who were determined to help them. Australians now ask: were these mistakes?

The essays in this book take us to regions colonised relatively recently (mostly in the period 1920–60) by missionaries and public servants, and little changed by public and private investment in new land uses (with the crucial exception of graded roads and airstrips): the western desert (as far east as the western Macdonnell Ranges), Arnhem Land, western Cape York. Though some of the Aboriginal people in these case studies had experience with cattle herds (e.g. at Hermannsburg and Aurukun missions), none of the communities from which these people decentralised were pastoral stations.

4 Short 2008: 20.

5 Behrendt 2013: 163–77.

6 Langton 2013.

As several contributors make clear, decentralising tendencies were already present in the work of missions and government settlements well before the Whitlam model of 'self-determination' began to bless such movements with funding. Gradualist approaches to the assimilation of the most recently colonised permitted missionaries such as Harold and Ella Shepherdson (in Arnhem Land) and public servants such as Harry Giese, Ted Evans, John Hunter and Jeremy Long (whose chapter reveals the 30-year genesis of a government settlement at Docker River in the Northern Territory) to consider pragmatically the question of Aboriginal (dis)aggregation. Sanitation problems, the logistics of water (for humans and livestock) and fighting among residents raised practical questions about how and where to service the people gathering in their care. And, as chapters on Warburton (David Brooks and Vikki Plant), Hermannsburg (Diane Austin-Broos) and Aurukun (David Martin, Bruce Martin and Peter Sutton) point out, the decentralising residents could continue their sense of always having lived on their country, as the management of mission cattle or the harvesting of dingo scalps had provided new sites, for one or more generations since the mission formed, and had occasioned revised temporalities of movement, beyond the mission site itself. The chapter by Frances Morphy and Howard Morphy on Yilpara outstation is particularly effective in evoking the formation of that place (on the north coast of Blue Mud Bay) in a longer timeframe. Yilpara has been an episode in 'a continuing adjustment by Yolngu to the process of colonial encapsulation', allowing Yolngu 'to re-emplace a regional system of relationships' that colonial intrusion in the 1920s and 1930s had caused to change (p. 303).

Assimilation policy created one of the enabling conditions of such adjustment. Entry into full welfare state entitlement – effected in a series of legislative and administrative steps in the years 1959–75 – gave people more choice about where to provision themselves. On outstations they could combine foraging with shop purchases, as long as they could get back to a store or arrange for goods to be delivered. Increasing access to motor vehicles, aircraft and boats – by private purchase or public provision – was essential to this new mix of material supports. Aboriginal purchasing power was boosted by the global success of Indigenous art. Art sales were a boon to the Pintupi, as Peter Thorley points out, but also a new kind of vulnerability, as Jon Altman shows in his narrative of the Kuninjku.

Several chapters underline the significance of the new breed of outback whites who – with tacit or explicit support from some progressive missionaries and public servants – assisted Aborigines to decentralise. Bill Edwards recalls – evidently with mixed feelings – 'hippies' who encouraged Pitjantjara to feel entitled to support without reciprocating 'work' as a previous generation of whites (such as Edwards himself) had defined it; some even introduced

marijuana to the lands. Contributors a generation younger than Edwards recall the assistance and encouragement that they gave. Fred Myers positions himself as a young PhD student who reciprocated the hospitality of his Pintupi hosts at Yayayi, as they broke away from Papunya. Ambivalently, he recalls that he was in implicit dispute with those who foresaw health problems for the Yayayi mob (pp. 92–93). David Martin remembers his own work as ‘absolutely central to the everyday operations and social sustainability of [Aurukun’s] Outstation Support Group’ (p. 211) that serviced up to 300 people on outstations south of the Kendall River in the late 1970s. The support group persuaded outstation residents to contribute to transport costs from their welfare benefits; it distinguished between committed and merely symbolic requests for assistance, and it insisted, before repairing tractors, that the Wik devise rules to manage their use. Peter Sutton, hoping to do fieldwork at Aurukun, was enlisted by a family that aspired to develop Peret, a former mission cattle camp with no living patri-clan to own it. Sutton became Peret’s store-keeper, organising a flow of tea, sugar, flour, powdered milk tobacco, matches and ammunition, on a line of credit from Burns Philp (p. 233). He too found himself at odds with whites who asked how children on outstations could be schooled. More recently, outstation supporters have included non-government organisations: the Centre for Independent Studies and the Sydney Cove Rotary club have combined to contribute buildings at Yilpara, and the bio-anthropologist of the Yolngu, Neville White, engaged the Rotary clubs of East Keilor and Melbourne to help build for Yolngu families at Donydji in Arnhem Land. Much less happily, Scott Cane wonders how he might better have advised the residents of YaggaYagga (an outstation of Balgo Mission): ‘Should I have refused to develop the program in haste and let the remaining \$3.7 million return to Treasury?’ (p. 273). Noting the recent despondency of his long-time friend Balang (aka the artist John Mawurndjul), Jon Altman now feels ‘deeply frustrated and angry at my inability to make a difference’ (p. 282).

The prominence of white support workers in this collection of papers makes clear that what outstation families have sought to get away from is not necessarily the ‘white-feller’ world (which, in certain forms, they continued to find indispensable to their quest for autonomy) but other unfamiliar or hostile Aboriginal people with whom colonisation has sometimes forced them to reside. When some Aboriginal people made the best of mission or settlement authority by refusing to share its benefits with others (quite possibly on good customary grounds), they created the motivations for those others to establish outstations as the basis for their own particular claims on the colonists. The political scientist Rolf Gerritsen made this decidedly unromantic point in what Kingsley Palmer shows to have been more romantic times (early 1980s): Aboriginal people compete for colonial resources.⁷ Cane’s account of YaggaYagga tells how

7 Gerritsen 1982.

the flow of resources to Balgo – in the form of infrastructure for artists and royalty income from Tanami goldmining – made it harder to keep crucial older people at YaggaYagga. Sarah Holcombe presents the formation of Mt Liebig by those calling themselves Luritja as self-determination ‘in relation to both other Aboriginal [non-Luritja] and non-Aboriginal people’. She cites not Gerritsen but Nicolas Peterson and Peter Sutton who have modelled long-term Aboriginal processes of territorial expansion and contraction. All three writers are relevant to understanding the territorial micropolitics of colonised Aboriginal Australians – before, during and after the ‘outstation’ years considered in this book.

Self-determination is intrinsically forward-looking. Before they were colonised, Aboriginal people devoted much effort to ensuring that the next generation was equipped with the knowledge and emotions that they would need to deal with a world that was not expected to change from that which sustained their parents. In postcolonial self-determination, Aboriginal authority cannot assume this continuity of world and therefore cannot expect that what socialised them will work as a socialisation of their sons and daughters. One way in which outstations were an experiment in ‘self-determination’ was that they allowed elders (or so it was hoped) to reclaim control of socialisation processes that they had ceded (willingly or not) to the colonists. But what futures were such elders imagining?

Some of these studies reveal the difficulty of making outstations the primary sites of the socialisation of the young. White laments ‘the lack of educational and training opportunities for [Yolngu] youth and young adults who are not equipped for formal secondary education’ (p. 342). Frances Morphy and Howard Morphy report that Yilpara adults have had to work hard politically to get the schooling they thought their children and youth needed. Altman worries that there is no clear alternative to being trained on Kuninjku country as an artist. YaggaYagga teenagers were left without role models, reports Cane. Bruce Martin (a Wik schooled beyond his homeland) finds on returning to Aurukun youths who have gained neither ‘deep cultural knowledge nor the ability to work between two worlds’ (p. 223). Brooks and Plant do not see among Ngaanyatjarra any development of a capacity to engage with the outside world. Holcombe briefly mentions that the youth of Mt Liebig – as in some other western desert communities – have troubled their elders with petrol-sniffing.

For the government, the imagined Aboriginal future’s central feature was the reduction or withdrawal of public financial support for outstation residents. That is, according to a Department of Aboriginal Affairs instruction (reproduced in Nic Peterson’s account of Nyirrpi) outstations were worth enabling if their intending residents proposed to be ‘self sustaining (cash flow, food and satisfaction of other basic needs)’ and if the local public servants saw ‘potential of project to be self-sustaining’ (p. 166). I doubt that the Aboriginal residents

understood this to be their venture's rationale: as 'disadvantaged' citizens they have had good reason to expect the state to finance the gap between what they earn and what they need to live even a materially poor existence. And did any of their local public service and mission champions believe that outstations would become 'self-sustaining'? Peterson doubts that policymakers have ever been able to imagine with any confidence 'the future for Aboriginal people in remote desert Australia', and he sees this as an instance of a worldwide problem of 'populations that are surplus to the labour requirements of their national economies' (p. 177). That is the deep structural problem to which outstations have become the much-debated experimental solution.

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