

Indigenous and Other Australians since 1901

by Tim Rowse

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At a time when Indigenous political movements in Australia insist that settler authorities reckon with powerful claims for treaty, recognition of sovereignty and Indigenous political representation, one is inevitably drawn to consider possibilities for political change. How can decolonisation be more than metaphor in a settler-colonial situation? What are the horizons of justice? These questions are central to Tim Rowse's *Indigenous and Other Australians since 1901*, which, in surveying and reflecting on the past 118 years of Australian settler-colonial policy thinking and practice, historicises the narrowing confines within which emancipation might be imagined or actualised.

This book presents an overview of a long and complex period, moving through continuities and transformations in characteristically ordered, lucid and readable style. Across 450 pages of text, Rowse takes us through many of the key political actors and institutions, including missionaries, anthropologists and politicians, as well as presenting often unconventional and provocative arguments on protection, assimilation, self-determination, race and Indigenous land rights. Many of these will prompt further research.

Indigenous and Other Australians deftly synthesises over a century of policy, threading together a set of ordering arguments that underlie the national narrative. First, the category 'Aboriginal' emerges as a dynamic product of engagement between colonial authority and its Indigenous objects. Second, the story of Australia's national period is presented as, in part, that of the South normalising or colonising the North, a space of troublingly persistent difference. And third, it narrates the post-frontier collision of qualitatively different political orders by examining settler interventions that have sought to confront and reduce the difference of Indigenous government.

In responding to a proposed new historical framework, one approach open to the reviewer is to ask where this might take us. I want to address this question by examining more closely the treatment of protection policy as the argument presented is, in some ways, the fulcrum for the entire story.

Writing against those ‘liberal’ historians who have been offended by the coercions of protection and have tended to criticise it as a ‘moral failure’ (pp. 151–52), Rowse instead asks whether protection policy did, in fact, protect Aboriginal people. And he answers this question through statistical reasoning; if protectionist institutions across the country were the sites of population growth, then, he argues, they protected. Drawing on Gordon Briscoe’s research, Rowse argues that coercive institutionalisation ‘probably secured basic nutrition, improved the detection and treatment of infectious diseases and helped to mitigate infective sexual contacts that had reduced the fertility of women’ (p. 150).

Rowse shows how, within the social world of protection, growing Indigenous populations were unevenly stratified: people experienced confinement in institutions of protection in different ways, and the ‘benefits’ of assimilation accrued to specific kinds of Indigenous people. Chief among these ‘benefits’ was the training and skill-development provided to those Indigenous people with non-Indigenous ancestry, classified by the state as ‘half-caste’. It was these people who were trained in literacy and numeracy, provided with a broader education and thrust into managerial roles. And when national policy turned to self-determination – understood in this book as a governmental mode that subsumed political aspirations – it was these people who were positioned and equipped to take advantage, to run the new institutions of Indigenous business and self-government. Protection and assimilation, in other words, were self-determination’s enabling conditions, and it was those most assimilated who were most able to take advantage of self-determination.

In its denouement, this is an analysis that helps us draw out the ways formal self-determination policies can be historicised in relation to protection, articulated as a new mode of integration rather than its repudiation. It further helps us to understand some of the ways racial formations have been reproduced despite a formal abandonment of racist language, and the limited potential of such government policies to emancipate Aboriginal peoples.

But it is also troublingly restrictive in its focus. Protection policies certainly may have protected people from some of the violence and predations of the settler-colonial world, albeit while subjecting them to a differently violent regime. But, one is prompted to ask, can we feasibly segment one aspect of that world from another, or might it be more effective rather to think of protection alongside the practices of land occupation, labour exploitation and violence that were driving Aboriginal people into institutions? Was protection, that is, just one element of an interdependent settler-colonial complex?

The narrowed story told is one of an increasingly confined world; the main story of the book is, ultimately, that of the erasure of Indigenous sovereignties. These sovereignties are described and theorised in some detail in the Introduction, as the products of kinship-based political orders that produce what the anthropologist Ian Keen terms ‘reproductive power’ through practices of polygyny (p. 12). But the concept does little productive work through the rest of the book, recurring only as evidence of Indigenous deficit, as producing subjects who do not keep regular daily work hours, for instance, or whose familial relationships chafe against modern corporate accountability. The book instead traces the apparently inexorable spread of settler sovereignty, first as the expansion of settler law across the continent, and then as the spread of ‘modern’ subjectivities from south to north. Indigenous sovereignty here, by contrast, is represented in retreat, as recalcitrant or maladjusted.

It may have been interesting to trace the ways the text could have been transformed by an account of persistent and transformative Indigenous articulations of sovereignty. Or, indeed, how broadening the frame – so as not to be bounded by centring the nation as the engine of history – could have told a story of Indigeneities that are not necessarily confined, or defined, within the nation.

I couldn’t help but wonder how Rowse’s framework would deal with the breadth, the insistence on reinvention and continuity, and the enactment of Indigenous sovereignties in the recent Uluru Statement from the Heart. Somewhat characteristically, rather than taking a position on the best way forward, Rowse ends *Indigenous and Other Australians* by wondering about the consequences of a failed future referendum on constitutional recognition. More questions, more research. This is a book that makes a series of arguments that will provoke further scholarship, a significant achievement in a crowded field.

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