

Malcolm Allbrook review of Anne Scrimgeour, *On Red Earth Walking: The Pilbara Aboriginal Strike, Western Australia 1946–1949*

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When Pilbara Aboriginal pastoral workers started coordinated strike action in May 1946, the Western Australian press did not know whether or not to take it seriously. ‘Nothing workem longa you’, a spokesman for the strikers, identified only as ‘Toby’, was quoted as saying by the *West Australian*; ‘We bin strike’. Displaying a common mixture of disdain and mockery, the report went on to blame visitors from other stations who induced the workers to stay up playing cards so they would ‘resent the necessity of early rising’,¹ and it was this, rather than the intolerable work conditions, that had brought on the strike. Not all contemporary reports were so flippant. Soon after the strike had started, the same newspaper acknowledged the dilemma the pastoralists and the state government faced. The ‘squatters’ could not work their stations ‘without the help of the natives’, who in turn could not live without ‘the help of the station owners and other employers’.² Both parties stood to lose from what was portrayed as a mutually beneficial relationship. Furthermore, most station owners, the argument went, provided well for their station workforces and, indeed, some said that they gained little return from their beneficence.

Anne Scrimgeour’s book *On Red Earth Walking* takes up the story of the strike from this point. But, while the *West Australian* and other state interests saw things very much from the viewpoint of the pastoralists, she is careful to set the scene from the perspective of the Aboriginal people of the region, *marrngu* to use the Nyangumarta term, the language that was (and is) spoken by many in the north-eastern part of the region. Indeed, the station economy, to adopt a perhaps over-used euphemism, had dominated the region from the arrival of Europeans in the mid-1860s. Aboriginal people from the diverse language groups of the Ashburton to the De Grey rivers region had faced a stark choice to either adapt to the new system or face incarceration or obliteration. Bound by labour ‘contracts’, many found themselves tied for life to a station with the status of virtual chattels. They were not paid, and laboured under the sole authority of the ‘boss’. Their children were born into bondage, and if Aboriginal workers did risk leaving the station, they could be hunted down by police and sentenced to prison with hard labour, although

1 ‘Natives on Strike, Station Mustering Halted’, *West Australian* (Perth), 28 April 1949, 27.

2 ‘Native Question, Problems in the Pilbara,’ *West Australian* (Perth), 27 June 1946, 11.

most were simply returned to the custody of their boss, regardless of their previous treatment. Furthermore, if the station changed hands, they were simply passed on as part of the station assets, chattels in every sense of the term.

On the face of it, the system had continued virtually unchanged since the 1860s. Over the course of the twentieth century the state government progressively tightened the operative legislation—the *Aborigines Act 1905*—to limit Aboriginal choices to two broad alternatives: unpaid station labour or segregation on a mission or reserve, the latter often meaning, in practice, removal from family and country and incarceration on Moore River Native Settlement or another institution in the south of the state. Yet, as Scrimgeour describes, choices remained for *marrngu* even in the context of such an oppressive legal regime. Many Aboriginal people, notably those from desert areas—Nyangumarta, Mangala, Juwaliny and other Western Desert peoples—sometimes chose to come into the stations, ‘pushed’ from their traditional lands by depopulation and progressive encroachment by Europeans, and ‘pulled’ by the desire to find lost relations, or by the desire for flour, tea, sugar and tobacco. They did not always intend to remain permanently but often did so in order to increase opportunities for their younger people, and because their homelands were becoming harder places in which to live, as more and more of their country men and women were drawn towards station country.

By the late 1940s, Scrimgeour identifies two concurrent societies in the Pilbara pastoral economy:

the settler social and economic realm, in which *marrngu* remained marginal and which they learned to negotiate with care and servility; and the social, cultural and religious world of the local Aboriginal community, into which the new arrivals were incorporated through existing family relationships and congruent kinship structures. (pp. 6–7)

By World War II, many Aboriginal pastoral workers were becoming impatient at the inequality of their arrangements. ‘Denigration and social distance, together with coercion and intimidation exerted principally through the agency of the police, formed the weft of the fabric of labour relations’, Scrimgeour writes, ‘woven together with protection, benevolence, loyalty and attachment’ (p. 39). Apart from the lack of wages, certain aspects of the pastoral relationship became lightning rods for discontent. Mealtime segregation was one—non-Aboriginal workers had their food served on plates and ate at tables while their Aboriginal co-workers were given bread and meat in the hand and ate outside. So too was the quantity and variety of provisions in lieu of wages, with some workers only provided with ‘soap and tobacco, needle and cotton, that’s all’ (p. 40). In addition, shelter was often non-existent or rudimentary, with station workers often left to make their own camps and, in wet weather, to find dry places where they could.

Yet so vulnerable was their legal position that station workers had little choice but to ‘bend to these indignities’ (p. 41), or face police violence or incarceration. Furthermore, denied access to education, they were generally unaware of their legal rights and, as Scrimgeour comments, commonly resorted to the ‘weapons of the weak’: ‘stealing vegetables from station gardens ... or “going bush” for a while when their labour was required’ (p. 41). World War II brought little direct improvement in their circumstances, although some have argued that greater employment opportunities, including wages, and contact with servicemen ‘with new ideas and new ways of relating to Aboriginal people’ (p. 44) set the scene for the strike action that began a year after the war’s end. The war though, did usher in changes that indirectly led to the strike. Firstly, demand for wool and the departure of most white workers on service tightened controls on Aboriginal pastoral workers, bringing measures to prevent their employment on military bases and interaction with armed services personnel, and keep them on the stations. Thus, it was a hardening, rather than a relaxation, of wartime labour regulations that brought increased dissatisfaction among Aboriginal station workers. Nonetheless, the war’s end also brought a broader attitudinal shift in the Australian population ‘towards more liberal ideas of human rights and equality’ (p. 45). Not only did this evolution in attitudes create a more generous public environment for the subsequent strike action, but it also influenced the thinking of some of the non-Aboriginal actors, notably the prospector and gold-miner Don McLeod, who came to play important roles in what was an extremely complicated operation.

The bulk of Scrimgeour’s narrative follows the progress of the strike from its first uncertain moves to its ultimate and broadly successful conclusion—in the sense that it achieved some of its goals of better conditions for Aboriginal workers on the stations and opened up the possibility of alternative occupations. It is a stirring story, made more so by the sheer complexity of coordinating action that required constant communications between a large number of pastoral properties over a very large area, all in the context of a legal regime designed to oppress the movements of Aboriginal people. The contributions of a number of Aboriginal men have long been recognised, to the extent that Dooley Binbin, Clancy McKenna and Jacob Oberdoo all have entries in the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, but Scrimgeour widens the cast of characters to include many others, including women such as Maggie Ginger and Caroline Jula, who had worked as domestics in station homesteads. Their story encapsulates the complexity of station relationships, for not only were they constantly in and about the inner sanctums of the station environment, they also performed intimate tasks such as cooking and caring for the children of the pastoral families.

Scrimgeour handles the diversity of the characters appearing in the narrative with confidence and acumen. She includes well-known Europeans in addition to the central figure, Don McLeod, as well as policemen and pastoralists, politicians and

bureaucrats. Thus we also meet those who played supporting and advisory roles, such as the literary figure Dorothy Hewett and her then husband, the lawyer Lloyd Davies. Particularly impressive is the author's use of Aboriginal evidence, much of it recorded in the storytellers' language. In her preparedness to take on the complexities of utilising and interpreting Aboriginal testimony, Scrimgeour has followed the practice she adopted in her previous collaboration with another prominent strike leader, Monty Hale (Minyjun), *Kurlumarniny: We Come from the Desert* (2012), which was awarded the Western Australian Premier's Book Award in 2013. The oral history sources listed in the bibliography shows the extent of her research. She recorded much of the material herself, and made deft use of interviews recorded by the linguists Barbara Hale and Mark Clendon, as well as material held in the collections of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, Canberra, and the State Library of Western Australia. Her skill in interpreting Aboriginal evidence and ability to weave it into the narrative is what really sets the book apart, even in the context of comprehensive archival and newspaper research. Through this we come to understand the Aboriginal actors as possessing agency and thus making choices, perhaps limited and threatened by the legal regime, but present nonetheless.

The use of biographical material is particularly impressive in its capacity to illuminate and complicate a story that has often been presented as a polemic. In contemporary accounts of the strike, narratives carried in newspapers tended to privilege the pastoralist and government viewpoint, but more recently, records such as Don McLeod's *How the West Was Lost* (1984) and Jolly Read and Peter Coppin's *Kangkushot* (1999) have documented Aboriginal perspectives, as well as placing the episode in the context of the rise of Aboriginal political action. One of the consequences of biographical evidence is its ability to add texture, so that we come to understand diverse viewpoints even in environments that are highly contested. So it is with Scrimgeour's book; not only do we hear, in many places for the first time, about the doubts, risks, conflicts and controversies of the Aboriginal actors, so do we come to understand the world of those who opposed them.

This is indeed an impressive book, the culmination of a depth of research and writing by Scrimgeour, who died in the year of its publication. She writes fluently but without ornament, and the footnoting, referencing and bibliography are detailed and informative. This is a book that has a story to tell, but does not shy away from controversy and complexity, or confine itself within historico-political orthodoxies. It is a fitting testament to one who, over a number of books and articles, added considerably to historical knowledge of the Pilbara, particularly the region's Aboriginal history. One must always hesitate in seeking to place a work such as this in the context of Australian historiography, but I would be surprised if this account of the Pilbara Aboriginal strike is ever surpassed in the quality of its research and narrative.

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