

Foreword

For several decades from the late nineteenth century, the New South Wales Aborigines Protection Board (APB) had extraordinary powers over the lives of Aboriginal people. Indeed, it obtained progressively greater control, with often devastating consequences for the very people it was charged with protecting. In their 1938 pamphlet, *Aborigines Claim Citizens Rights!*, the Aboriginal activists William Ferguson and Jack Patten condemned the Board for its hypocrisy and for its ‘cruelty and callousness towards the Aborigines’.¹

The impact of the New South Wales APB’s policies on Aboriginal people has been the focus of much scholarly energy in recent decades, especially in relation to its child removal policies and practices. Richard Egan is therefore to be commended for the valuable and original contribution he has made to this scholarship. Despite the APB being an influential body, with oversight of a department that implemented a range of discriminatory policies, its internal dynamics and ways of operating have not been a major focus of previous scholarship. Egan fills this gap by concentrating specifically on the role of the Board: on how (or indeed if) its members interacted with Aboriginal people; and on which members drove the agenda. It is an important scholarly contribution because, in contrast to other Australian states where significant individuals exerted influence as ‘chief protectors’ or ‘native commissioners’, Aboriginal policy in New South Wales was driven by a somewhat amorphous ‘board’.

The centrepiece of this book is its analysis of the 64 men who served on the APB from 1883 to 1940. The book functions in part as a group biography of the APB, using both quantitative and qualitative methods. It includes carefully researched profiles of the often woefully ill-equipped men appointed to the Board, as well as a statistical analysis of members’

1 Patten and Ferguson, *Aborigines Claim Citizens Rights!*, 3.

length of tenure and rates of meeting attendance. Egan is able to show that Aboriginal policy was shaped for the most part by a much smaller group of Board members, perhaps fewer than a dozen, who are subject to more detailed biographical analysis. He also demonstrates that, following a reconstruction of the Board in 1916, it was far less active in its oversight of policy, leaving Aboriginal affairs in the hands of a largely unaccountable ‘cabal’ of departmental officers.

In writing a history of the APB, Egan is very conscious that the lived experiences of Aboriginal people who were subject to its policies are a crucial part of this history. He gives numerous examples of how the Board’s policies and practices affected Aboriginal people across the state, with a particular focus on the Dharawal people of the coastal regions south of Sydney. He has also undertaken an extensive study of APB data on child removals and placements, which is supported by graphs and maps, and complemented by useful interpretations and conclusions regarding the meanings and limitations of that data. He shows that there was no clear logic to patterns of Aboriginal child removal, which might have been influenced, for example, by local station managers.

While Egan does not ignore the subjects of protective policy in New South Wales, his focus is nonetheless on the agents of this policy. He identifies three key periods in the history of the Board: a foundational period from 1883 characterised by a more laissez faire approach to Aboriginal policy; a second more activist period from 1897, which included passage of the *Aborigines Protection Act 1909* (NSW) and an increase in rates of child removal; and a final period from 1916, which saw real power pass to a small group of officials working for the Board. It is a deeply researched and nuanced book, which reveals how the administrative activity of the Board and its officers had a dehumanising effect, with the Aboriginal presence in New South Wales constructed in abstract terms and perceived as a social problem. The book exposes what is at times a startling indifference to Aboriginal people’s rights and interests.

I had the privilege of examining the doctoral thesis upon which this book is based, and it is wonderful to see it published. It provides a nuanced account of the APB – including its power and influence, but also its dysfunction and failures – and is a unique and valuable contribution to the history of Aboriginal policy in New South Wales.

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This text is taken from *Power and Dysfunction: The New South Wales Board for the Protection of Aborigines 1883–1940*, by Richard Egan, published 2021 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.