This is What Happened: Historical Narratives by Aborigines. Edited by Luise Hercus and Peter Sutton. Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, Canberra, 1986. Pp. x + 341, with illustrations, maps, bibliography, index, h.c. $22.95.

Recent years have witnessed a rapid growth of publications based on Aboriginal oral narratives, including a considerable number of biographical accounts. These are predominantly written in English. Meanwhile linguists have long made it a practice, as part of their documentation of Aboriginal languages, to record stories told in the languages. Some of these stories have appeared in print, either in grammars of languages as ‘texts’ illustrating how the language works or in volumes that include grammar, texts, and dictionary (e.g. Heath 1981), although some complete volumes of texts have been published as well (von Brandenstein 1970, Capell 1972, Glass and Hackett 1979, Schebeck 1974, Heath 1980a and 1980b). Such texts tend to consist of traditional myths, ethnographic information, or personal reminiscences; very few of them are on historical themes. In the last few years, however, a number of overtly historical texts have appeared (Hercus 1977 and 1981, Merlan 1978, Murray and Austin 1981). Anthropologists have also published some texts in Aboriginal languages (e.g. Tindale 1939; Berndt and Berndt 1951), and numerous children’s stories have been produced for literacy-teaching purposes by the Summer Institute of Linguistics and the literacy production centres associated with the Northern Territory bilingual education programme.

The volume under review is especially welcome then, as it brings together a collection of historical narratives in Aboriginal languages, with translations provided according to the usual standards in Australian linguistics (see Donaldson 1979). This book, in fact, claims to be ‘the first book devoted to the contact history of a hunting and gathering people in which the people give accounts in their own languages’ (p.6). We have 33 ‘stories’ in 22 different languages, which were first related orally onto tape by 26 different Aboriginal authors, and were later transcribed, analysed and translated by 17 different linguists. (We are not informed whether the tapes are available for listening in the A.I.A.S. sound archive.) Most of the stories are prefaced with a short introduction that gives some biographical information on the author and/or provides the historical context of the narrative. The Aboriginal language version of the story can be read with the help of a morpheme-by-morpheme interlinear translation; the English translation which follows can be read on its own or in conjunction with the original, since the sentences are numbered in each version, although the fact that the two versions are not on facing pages makes this rather inconvenient. The Aboriginal language is printed in smaller characters and in double columns on a buff-coloured background. While this design feature makes for a clear separation between the two languages, it also makes the Aboriginal language version rather hard to read. The book is attractively illustrated with numerous photographs (including many of the authors) and maps, and is provided with an index, relevant bibliography, and notes on the texts and their translation.

The narratives are generally on the theme of Aboriginal contact with non-Aboriginals, and together they ‘constitute a reasonable cross-section of personal views of contact history as told by Aboriginals’ (p.1). The texts, which vary in length from 4 to 204 sentences, are grouped into four parts titled ‘Early Contacts’, ‘Strangers from Asia’, ‘Fighting and Killing’, and ‘Coming to Terms’.

The theme of conflict and violence at the meeting of two cultures is, predictably, well
represented here. Some of the stories tell of killings of Blacks and Whites that are otherwise unknown. There are also Aboriginal perspectives of known incidents such as the massacre at Koonchera Point (Birdsville area, 1880s) and the spearing of Frank Bowman (North Queensland, 1910), for which Bruce Sommer puts forth a new historical reconstruction. We also have some vivid descriptions of Aboriginals being pursued by police or punitive parties and often smartly escaping.

The incomprehension that accompanies first contact is another recurrent theme. Storytellers express amusement at their own (or their people’s) first reaction to novelties such as guns, whips, sugar, tea, tobacco, root vegetables. A very personal flavour is communicated by stories such as: the boy who was forced by adults to steal tobacco from a station building; the teenager from Groote Eylandt who went off with the Macassans for four years, leaving his relatives thinking he was dead; Ben Murray witnessing an Afghan’s snake-charming act in which the charmer was bitten and died; Fanny Brown’s discovery of a gold nugget; the Aboriginal man who ‘boned’ a white man, then undid his magic out of fear of reprisal. The historian will also be interested in a Gurindji account of the Wave Hill strike, and in the story of how the town of Cobar got its name.

Some of the texts are not really ‘narratives’. Two are songs, in which the author comments on the appearance of a Macassan taking a bath in the sea or of a Chinaman in a shearing shed. Some of the narratives are not strictly ‘historical’. The first, ‘The way it was’, is essentially an ethnographic text describing the traditional way of life in northeastern South Australia — including such fascinating details as the practice of holding young pelicans in a ‘yard’ to ensure a fresh meat supply. Another descriptive text describes the (introduced) card game of ‘guns’ and comments on the social consequences of gambling. The last text, ‘Land Rights’, is a protest about the Aboriginals’ loss of their lands, while the preceding text produces the speech given by a Gurindji leader on the occasion of the handover by the then Prime Minister of a lease to part of Wave Hill Station.

The 22 languages represented here are, as can be expected, predominantly from the more remote parts of Australia. 7 are from the Northern Territory, 6 from (North) Queensland, 4 from South Australia, 3 from (northern) Western Australia, and one each from New South Wales and Victoria. Only two of them, Anindilyakwa and Murrinh-Patha, are among the 18 major languages having over 500 speakers (see Black 1983:5; cf. Yallop 1982:44). As the editors note (p.5), the volume illustrates the diversity of Aboriginal languages; the contrast between the 7 ‘prefixing’ languages and the remaining non-prefixing languages is quite obvious. The editors also suggest that the book could be used as a reader in Aboriginal languages; the linguist may, indeed, be interested in the texts as illustrations of the grammar of individual languages, as material for the study of discourse structure, or even as a source for observations on vocabulary (for example, the words for ‘gun’ or ‘horse’ in the different languages would make an interesting study; the etymologist may be interested in the Yandruwandha (S.A.) words *padi* ‘grub’ and *raudu* ‘nardoo’).

This volume also illustrates the diversity of practice within the field of Australian linguistics. In the spelling systems used for the languages, as many as six different symbols are used to represent the equivalent phoneme. Some of the orthographic systems involve the use of diacritic marks, which are occasionally left off by accident. In some ways it would have been preferable if a ‘practical orthography’ had been used for all the texts. Furthermore, although the editors have tried to make the coding of grammatical morphemes as uniform as
REVIEWS

possible, the ergative case marker, for example, is rendered in the interlinear translations by such diverse glosses as ERG, AG, A, and OP. The linguistic reader is aided, however, by the provision of tables that explain both the orthographic symbols and the grammatical abbreviations.

The complexity of this publication project, from the point of view of both the editors and the publisher, perhaps partially excuses the long delay in the appearance of the book, although I understand that the book could have come out as much as five years ago. The editors first contacted the participating linguists in 1975 (p.1); as some of the stories were recorded as early as 1963, the contents thus have a somewhat dated feel about them. Some anachronisms I noted are: ‘the present Hooker Creek Aboriginal Reserve’ (p.305) has been Aboriginal freehold land since 1976 and Hooker Creek is now called Lajamanu; the language called Roper Pidgin by Heath and Roper Creole by Sharpe, is now referred to as Kriol; a number of elderly authors described in the present tense have no doubt passed away since the time of writing.

Apart from a few minor quibbles, we should be grateful to the editors for organising and compiling, and to the A.I.A.S. for (finally) producing, this unique and valuable collection of narratives, which is highly recommended to all students and interested readers of Aboriginal history, culture, and language.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Hercus, Luise. ‘Tales of Ñadu-Dagali(Rib-Bone Billy)’, Aboriginal History, 1, 1977:52-76.
von Brandenstein, C.G. (comp.). Narratives from the North-West of Western Australia in the Ngarluma and Jindijparndi Languages. 3 vol. Canberra, 1970.

HAROLD J. KOCH
AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL UNIVERSITY

The principal life-interest of A.T. Yarwood appears to be the historical relationship between white Australians and Asians. The section of the book which deals with this topic (about a third) is well-informed and cogently argued. I have no quarrel with it, and shall confine my remarks to the other two-thirds, which deals with the relationship between white Australians and Aborigines. This section is in my opinion much less satisfactory.

A principal theme is the influence of the intellectual roots of the Europeans on their subsequent relationship with other races. There is some uncertainty in the authors’ minds whether the whites were prisoners of their own values, or whether the invasion proceeded through a combination of their preconceptions and physical needs; perhaps rationalisations were merely ‘designed to salve the consciences of exploiters’ (p.209). Gradually this theme is abandoned and the book becomes more of a straight history. Here is no cause for complaint. The authors are being a little more honest, and a little less ethnocentric, in calling their book Race Relations in Australia, unlike the rest of us who continue to write as if ‘Aboriginal history’ is of no interest to anybody until the whites come into the story.

The weakness of the Aboriginal two-thirds of the book is that it is out of touch with the thinking of the few years before it was published. A rough and ready rule of the 1970s can still be applied to authors of general Aboriginal histories: to what extent do they refer to individual tribes rather than to ‘the Aborigines’. Yarwood and Knowling mention very few tribes or linguistic groups. Too many examples are drawn from a single area (the New England region).

Some of the sources are old-fashioned (eg. Goldsmith, 1951 on the Battle of the Pinjarra), or unreliable (eg. Willey, When the Sky Fell Down). One can read through the chapters on south-eastern Australia and conclude that nothing happened worth mentioning before 1850 apart from the Sydney resistance, Phillip’s head-hunting expedition, Macquarie’s Institution, Robinson, Myall Creek and the Port Phillip Protectorate. Some hoary old myths are perpetuated: it is simply not true, for instance, that punitive measures had ceased in New South Wales by 1850 (p. 157). There is scarcely a work of anthropology cited in the bibliography and the consequences of this neglect are apparent in the text. The authors seem quite unaware that they are blundering into a minefield in their assertion that, in relation to the Hawkesbury (but by implication in reference to the whole continent) ‘A style of repression had begun that would destroy the tribes as traditional social units, leaving only scattered individuals to adapt to the white man’. Yarwood and Knowling do not seem to be sufficiently acquainted with the most innovative anthropology, the best historical theses and oral literature, to make judgements independent of the standard sources. The lack of insight stands in sharp contrast to the sections dealing with the establishment of the White Australia Policy, which have exactly the qualities which the Aboriginal sections lack.

The trouble with being out of touch with contemporary white and black thinking is that the platforms for writers of Aboriginal history are changing so fast. In the 1950s and 1960s, thanks to Berndt and others, it became acceptable to write about Aboriginal history and concede considerable wrong-doing by the whites. In the 1970s and 1980s, thanks to Reynolds and others, it became the accepted norm that Aborigines offered vigorous and widespread resistance to the invasion. The concept of Aboriginal resistance became a new platform, not just for writers of learned articles and books, but of newspaper features and
REVIEWS

Radio programs. It became the atmosphere, the ambience of non-specialist information.

The authors are well in control of these developments. Yet for a year or two before the book was published there was a further shift in the perception of Aborigines, this time as the agents or initiators of change. The most obvious example was the analysis of the abandonment of the assimilation policy in favour of integration. Aboriginal opposition to assimilation began to be recognised as the root cause of the policy's failure. This concession I believe signalled what will become the gradual adoption by many historians of the position that Aborigines survived primarily through their own efforts. Their refusal to be killed, separated, deculturated, protected, dispersed and assimilated explains, ultimately, where they are today. White advisers, who undoubtedly have had influence in issues such as Land Rights, followed the black leads, leads which are now, as often as not, lost to white perceptions. Aborigines in the 1980s owe their survival as Aborigines to nobody but themselves, and the concept of Aborigines as initiators may well become a new platform of historiography.

'Today's platforms were last year's discussions, the stuff of common-rooms and seminars. Yet there is little awareness in this book of our changing explanations of why things happened. Thus the general argument for the changes in legislation in the 1960s and 1970s, though not explicitly made, is based by Yarwood on the whites' realisation of the inequalities of their own laws. One may as well argue that changes in public attitudes and law regarding women came about through the same realisation by males! More specifically, Yarwood argues that important changes followed the Second World War. They were caused by the questioning of the ideology of racism and race suppression, the notoriety attached to Hitler's treatment of the Jews, and the creation of an international community which found intolerable the 'mean, narrow and selfish prejudice' which characterised Australia's treatment of Aborigines (p. 259). All of this may be true, but any discussion of the pressures affecting policy should begin with the confidence gained by Aboriginal servicemen and others, as they came to realise that there was an alternative to the mission and pastoral station, that regulations could be defied, that the whites were not infallible, that homelands could be returned to; above all the perception of themselves as people of worth.

Does it matter that the book is a little out of date in its tone? Yes it does, because, whether we like it or not, the writing of Aboriginal history is a political act. This is a heavy, responsible-looking tome written principally by a senior historian. Many students of Australian history and race relations, as well as general readers, will look to it for guidance. It is a moral, concerned book, but much of its explanations of change are not just out of date, but ethnocentric. It is hard to know why Yarwood was persuaded to leave the field of white/Asian race relations which he obviously knows so well.

PETER READ


It is of the utmost importance that the results of the growing body of Australian prehistoric archaeological research be made available in readily accessible form not only to prehistorians
ABORIGINAL HISTORY 1985 9:2

in Australia and overseas, but also to researchers in related disciplines and to the interested public in Australia. This volume is a well edited and clearly written report on the research that Sandra Bowdler, now Professor of Prehistory at the University of Western Australia, undertook during the 1970s for her Ph.D. It is well illustrated with figures and plates.

Hunter Hill existed during the Pleistocene glacials when sea levels were lower and there was a land bridge across the Bass Strait. The hill became an island off the north-west tip of Tasmania during the most recent rise in sea level. The archaeological excavations described by Bowdler were undertaken in a large sea-cut cave, called Cave Bay Cave, near Cave Bay on the east coast of the island. There is a fascinating description of how, as the excavation progressed, clues to the importance of the deposits were found and followed up. This was a difficult site to excavate because of extensive roof falls, but careful stratigraphic control and radiocarbon dates have provided a chronology for the occupation of the site by people, peregrine falcons, owls and Tasmanian devils.

The earliest human occupations date between 23 000 and 18 000 BP with a further hearth dated to some 15 000 BP. At this time the land bridge was in existence and marine foods are absent from the debris in the cave. Environmental indicators suggest grassy plains surrounded the site with a cold, dry and windy climate prevailing during the Last Glacial Maximum. The people left very few artefacts in the cave, but those that were found included quartz with bipolar flaking, a core scraper and several bone points that are reminiscent of similar assemblages on mainland Australia.

The next period of human occupation recorded in the deposits, the Lower Midden, dates between about 6600 and 4000 BP when the sea had risen close to the present-day level. People were exploiting marine resources and marine bird, shellfish and fish remains are found in the deposits together with those of terrestrial animals. Coastal woodland surrounded the cave providing a very different habitat from that of the Late Pleistocene. Quartzite artefacts were more common at this time and the stone tools were larger than those that pre- and post-dated them. A few bone tools were also found.

After 4000 BP there was intermittent occupation with the Upper Midden dating between about 2600 and less than 1000 BP. The Cave Bay Cave deposits, in common with Tasmanian mainland sites, do not include fish and there is a distinct difference in the size and species of shellfish present in this Upper Midden compared with the Lower Midden. Analysis of the meat yield of the shellfish species indicates that the gathering of shellfish during the period represented by the Lower Midden gave a lower return than did abalone collecting in Upper Midden times suggesting an extension of the gathering range to the lower midlittoral and infralittoral zones in the late Holocene. The cave appears to have been abandoned prior to the arrival of Europeans.

The main substance of the publication lies in the detailed analyses of the wide range of finds. Perhaps the most important of these are the faunal remains and the author has gone to considerable lengths to develop an explicit methodology to distinguish between the various agents of accumulation. This in itself is a major contribution to taphonomic studies in Australia. The interpretation of the results is free of polemic; problem areas are discussed candidly and succintly in both local and wider context. We look forward to reading more about further research in this important region.

H.J. DEACON UNIVERSITY OF STELLENBOSCH

240