

FROM SYDNEY TO TINGHA:

EARLY DAYS IN THE ABORIGINAL-AUSTRALIAN FELLOWSHIP

Jack Horner

Charles Leon, when he was President of the Aboriginal-Australian Fellowship (AAF), informed me that after William Ferguson died in 1950 the *kooris* of Sydney were helpless. Apathy ran very high.¹ The Aborigines Welfare Board still controlled the news of 'the dark people' in the state,² the white people were building their post-war suburban homes and the *kooris* were 'knocked right and left'. When the Fellowship voluntarily disbanded in August 1969, its work done, Leon commented: 'What the Fellowship did in ten years was fantastic; people were hearing for the first time that Aborigines were subject to discrimination and under separate laws'.³

In the AAF's first five years (it was founded in 1956), most people, black or white, who took part in the advancement movement were moved by social conscience rather than reason, and few had graduated from universities. Whether influenced by Namatjira prints, or the more radical Don McLeod and his 1946 strike of Aboriginal station hands in the Pilbara, or the co-operative ideals of the Anglican priest Father Alf Clint,⁴ or by something else, the white people felt strongly that race relations in Australia might be better.

The movement's social history tutors were Mrs Mary Bennett and Dr Charles Duguid, both veteran field activists. The FCAATSI (Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders) enthusiasts as yet were unacquainted with the works of Fay Gale and Jeremy Beckett; many anthropologists of that time (and, indeed, journalists like Colin Simpson) were concentrating on Aboriginal people living a tribal life.

In the mid-1960s the national Aboriginal advancement body, FCAATSI, was a loose affiliation of (at most) sixty-seven voluntary associations. Just why a single-minded concern for Aborigines should have seized so many middle-class white people in Australia in the 1950s is a mystery. You might call it a miracle.

Sending soldiers to distant lands during the Second World War broke our sense of isolation. But the motivation to help the Aboriginal cause possibly had more connection with the

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¹ For Charles Leon's comment on apathy see Horner 1974:170.

² Goodall 1987.

³ For report of Leon's speech at the disbandment of the Fellowship on 20 August 1969 see *Fellowship* 1969; a verbatim account is in J. Horner's personal files, Canberra.

⁴ Father W.A. Clint (1908-1980) was the Director of the Australian Board of Missions Christian Community Co-operative Society from 1957 to 1962. In 1962 the society was renamed the Co-operative for Aborigines Ltd.; it still exists as the Tranby Co-operative College, Glebe, Sydney.

atomic bombs dropped on Japan, the 1950 British rockets aimed over Pitjantjatjara country in South Australia, and the outrageous atomic explosions at Woomera in 1953 and 1956.

We were stirred to notice, for the first time, dark men standing outside the rural post offices. In 1952 a Melbourne committee called the Council for Aboriginal Rights publicised a Darwin strike; a Sydney body, the Aboriginal-Australian Fellowship, came together in support of an Aboriginal woman leader, Pearl Gibbs; a second Melbourne association, the Aborigines Advancement League, sparked off a generous response from the public, for Aboriginal welfare. Doug (later Sir Douglas) Nicholls in 1957 travelled to Laverton, Western Australia, to help a committee investigate physical poverty in desert tribes overwhelmed by the compulsory loss of their land made necessary by the Maralinga tests. Nicholls returned to Melbourne much affected, and our movement took a new and compassionate direction.

When I became Honorary Secretary of the Aboriginal-Australian Fellowship in Sydney in September 1958, almost at once I was whirled into taking my first 'field' trip to Tingha, in the cold, forested mountains of northern New South Wales. My wife Jean drove the car. We were asked to look at Aboriginal reserves (an illegal activity for white folks), and to check complaints about policemen harassing Aborigines. It was all new to us. The white members of our committee were ignorant; the black members put up with that, convinced that we would change.

Jean and I stopped for refreshment at Quirindi, where I recalled that Herbert Groves and Charles Leon (the first two Aboriginal Presidents of the AAF) had told me there was a reserve, Walhallow Station, at Caroona, nine miles (14.5 km) away. Groves had been handyman there during the Depression; and Leon had remembered that, in the 1890s, a friendly squatter had bequeathed that land to local Aboriginal families. As I thought I owed something to Groves and Leon, I was determined to look over their former home.

School was just out at Caroona. The segregated Aboriginal primary school stood well apart from the village. White children and dark children, walking in separate clusters, passed one another without speaking. The young Aborigines, I noticed, were either unnaturally quiet or else in skittish high spirits. I watched them for a while.

On an impulse, I interviewed the teacher at Walhallow Aboriginal School. At first he described his hopes for the children. Then, all at once he fumed as he told me of the mutual dislike the station manager and the teacher had for one another. Their personal feelings, pent up by the frustrations of the station and the need to set up one's authority, caused endless quarrelling. The constant loneliness made it worse. For months past they could not address one another without shouting. Their clash of authority, expressed over the school gate, touched everything in their day's work.

As for teaching the children, he was encouraging them to grow a vegetable garden to supplement official rations. He was resigned to their cultural deprivation, he said, he would mention penny-rulers, or lounge chairs, in his lessons and then remember that they had never seen such things. He might raise their tolerance for other people, and then recall that they must conform to arbitrary rules from the manager. (Once there had been a milking herd at Walhallow, but the people now used powdered milk.) For most teachers, he admitted, appointment to a segregated Aboriginal school was a lower grade posting, despised but accepted for the sake of promised promotion. Usually the teachers stayed for two years.

The manager had been seven years before the mast; he knew how to give orders. Those were his qualifications. He drove us round the station in a big truck, not allowing us to meet the blacks as I had no authority. That was a blessing: I had no wish to be thought *his* friend.

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Opening of new house for Aboriginal family, Armidale, November 1958.
Photo: Jack and Jean Horner.

He was, after all, the manager and I would need to maintain my goodwill with the Aboriginal residents. Walhallow was a large village of scamped fibro cottages, unpainted and uncared-for, built by the New South Wales Aborigines Welfare Board in 1949. As we roared around, children cheered us like royalty.

Three boys were waiting for us by our Morris Minor, eager to talk. At first their questions came slowly, till they accepted us. There was no point in attending school, they said. Flight to Sydney was their high ambition, although they were aware they had few skills. High schools offered them little hope. The lessons there had little relevance to their lives.

'Where does it get me a job, mister?' one boy asked me, earnestly. 'This was my first year at Quirindi. I can stay nex' year, if I like. If I stay here, it means fencin' for the farmers, like Dad done, or fruit pickin'. Maybe I'll learn to shear, if I'm lucky.'

'The best jobs on the farms go to the white kids,' another boy said. 'Their families get the pickings.' He threw a stone unerringly at a distant tree, and grinned at his skill.

So their lives revolved around seasonal work, and for much of the year the parents would need to stretch the money out. When we exhausted the subject of jobs, I turned to talk about life on the station:

'The manager — what's he like?' I asked.

'Huh. Not much. Not like the one before him. There was cows and horses and everything.'

This opinion impressed me at first, but I found later that a nostalgia for the previous boss was part of the life upon stations. That made the current manager fair game for calumny. Since the manager (and his wife, called matron) ran the reserve community by a fairly strict interpretation of the regulations, the residents concluded that his loyalty was directed to the Welfare Board rather than to them.

'What's the place for the best jobs round here?'

'The railways,' the boys said together. 'At Where It's Crook.'

Werris Creek was an important junction, with a large shunting yard. I wondered at their choice of arduous labour in the goods vans; but a trade, with consequent promotion, was always possible in the railways service.

Tamworth, then a fast-growing city, had recently formed a small committee of middle-class white people, to help the local Aboriginal families. They raised money with home-made cakes at market stalls, so they could be independent. A clerk at East-West Airlines was the honorary secretary. After listening to his story, I warned him politely of the dangers of dispensing charity, which, in Pearl Gibbs's experience, had crushed the natural pride of Aborigines.

I urged the secretary to keep the Aboriginal-Australian Fellowship informed of any racial discrimination in the city, so that with this evidence we could stir a government department. We were hoping to become the Sydney agent for all the small country committees supporting the riverbank Aboriginal communities. This reminded him that the Welfare Committee at Wellington (the Tamworth Committee's inspiration), which had begun as a social concern by the churches in 1944, still stood behind any Nanima Reserve Aborigines appearing in the courts, to prevent legal discrimination.

Staying overnight at the old Uralla Hotel, we walked slowly down the Uralla main street, savouring the Victorian atmosphere. Bright moonlight fell upon little weatherboard shops with their curved corrugated-iron roofs, casting the brick footpath, wooden posts and hitching-rails into shadow. No electricity. Above us the shop pelmets advertised: HAIR-DRESSER, BUTCHER, DRAPERY. Across the wide street, I noticed a large building on a

knoll dominating the whole street – a police station. Neat lawns, plant pots guarding the entrance with small firs.

Groves had told me that in former years the police officers in New South Wales had been agents for the Aborigines Protection Board, taking girls from their mothers to become 'apprentice' domestic servants for squatters and well-to-do people. Few ever saw their parents again. So here was a symbol of suppression. (The practice continued in 1958, under a civil-service power, not using the police.) Police officers in 1958 had a mandate, as Board agents, to enter a reserve cottage to 'inspect' it, ostensibly for cleanliness; yet they also laid charges at this time if they saw liquor laws being breached in the hut.

We arrived in Armidale the following day, to find a carnival mood. The Armidale Association for the Assimilation of Aborigines (AAAA), consisting of university staff and townspeople,⁵ had raised money to build a new suburban home, decorated of course in the latest fashion, for an Aboriginal family. New South Wales Chief Secretary, the Hon. G.A. (Gus) Kelly, was to present the house that historic day. The idea of donating a new home for a good family was well-meaning and popular, full of whitefella notions that by changing the environment you change the human being. The whole committee enthused: they had 'bled Armidale white' for funds, they said, and were both relieved and excited.

The AAAA had begun by accident. About fifteen months before a famous Australian writer, Kylie Tennant, had given lectures on Australian literature at the University of New England. The wives of the Arts Faculty conveyed their thanks with a party in her honour. Over tea, they told her that they were anxious to help the local Aboriginal people, but they had not met them. 'Why not now?' the author said, encouragingly. So they piled into their cars and drove to the town dump. There the dark women and the white women, practical as always and with no condescension at all, discussed the needs. When the faculty-wives heard from the dump-wives that Father Kelly, a young Catholic priest, was keen to build houses, they formed the committee to support him.⁶

At the new home, the Minister, Gus Kelly joined Aborigines Welfare Board members and Armidale city councillors, sitting in light canvas chairs on the veranda. White people made up the crowd; the new tenants were the only blacks in sight. After many formal speeches the Minister, extending a pink plump hand to the Aboriginal man, gave him the symbolic Yale key. From the crowd there came fervent clapping. Afterwards Jim Warburton, the director of the University of New England's Adult Education Department, told me that because Aboriginal youngsters rarely got past second year at high school, the AAAA Committee had decided, as their first priority, to create scholarships.

'It's in our line of work.' Warburton said, 'they could continue school here in Armidale.'

⁵ The housing committee in 1958 comprised Mrs Susan Stock, Evelyn Moore, Dr L. Goddard, Mrs Joan Llewellyn, Max Sewell, Des Murray. Evelyn Moore (of the Armidale Teachers' College), as original convener of the committee, from September 1957 to July 1958, was responsible for much of the organising work; Mrs Stock took over as convener in August 1958. The committee had spent fourteen months raising donations, organising concerts. The townspeople of Armidale and the university people were equally involved in the enterprise. The Association later founded a kindergarten centre and a clubroom for Aborigines in the city. See also *Dawn* 1959:1-2. Evelyn Moore represented AAAA at the first FCAATSI Conference in Adelaide, January 1959.

⁶ See Tennant 1959; see also Bandler and Fox 1983.

In contrast to affluent Armidale, Tingha was depressed. Some cottages were in disrepair. By chance, our car followed a horse and buggy into town; it was driven by an Aboriginal woman, and was carrying one small son and a full shopping bag. Suddenly they veered off the road through dismal, featureless bush to where stood the last few tin huts on the old Tingha Reserve. At one time the Aboriginal population here had been large; from 1908 to 1933 the Christian Evangelical annual religious conventions had been crowded out. In 1958 it seemed almost deserted.

As I slowly walked towards the hut, praying for courage, the woman was unpacking groceries in the kitchen. She looked out, expressing astonishment at seeing a white man.

'We've not seen a white man here since the welfare officer, Mister Green, two years ago,' she exclaimed. I thought at first she was angry but I waited, not venturing further. I knew that policemen and Board officers often barged into cottages by habit. Minutes went by.

The woman appeared at the lintel, smiling uncertainly, sufficiently worried not to give me her name. She was dark, not heavily built, simply dressed, standing with her head on one side as though listening for something. She brushed back her hair with her hand in a characteristic gesture, and I saw that she had no ornament but a wedding-ring and a hair-clip. Her straightforward manner impressed me. She showed no fear at all. I think she thought I was a salesman.

I explained who I was, and about the Fellowship.

'Oh yes, white people say they will do things,' she commented, matter-of-factly, but her deep-set sepia eyes did not blaze with anger. She stared with full appraisal, wondering what crazy human being had been thrust at her. Her cynicism of white men's good intentions hit me hard. I was aware.

We talked placidly of the Welfare Board, and of the policemen at Tingha and the powers given by the Protection Act.

'The sergeant, he comes here from time to time and looks us over. But when I want some blankets, I have to go to the police station.' She sized me up, taking her time. 'Don't go much on him, myself, he rouses on the men when they're boozed. Says the Board obliges him to do that. I think he gets a lot of fun at our expense.'

The serious eyes challenged me. 'Every year,' she went on, 'he organises a Christmas party for the dark children.' No flicker of amusement, but mockery was in the voice. I snickered; and her reply was a sad weariness of spirit. She didn't need to tell me she despised all policemen.

'Here, I've got work to do.' She called to the two children inside not to do something. Turning to me, she gave me a name: a leading Aboriginal family in town, people we could trust. I thanked her and walked away, part shamed, part excited. I tried to conjecture historical reasons why Aborigines did not get on with the state police force.

The family she spoke of proved to be most helpful. Three married sisters, each with a young family in her cottage, and the two strong-minded grandparents headed the family. One sister had a husband away from town, droving for five months. They were all too cautious to speak much about policemen, merely saying they had a 'down' on dark people. It surprised and stirred us, though, that they accepted the Horners as their friends. We were introduced, and swept into the family presence. Conversation was in a sparkling mood, as the women showed us a family collection of gems, discovered in the old alluvial Tingha mines. Their laughter was infectious. Despite the appearance of physical poverty, as I perceived it — simple weatherboard homes with hessian walls inside — they had ignored it. The

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Side elevation of new house.
Photo: Jack and Jean Horner.



Homes at Tingha, November 1958.
Photo: Jack and Jean Horner.

eldest daughter had just finished third year at high school, they told us proudly.

I was still perplexed as to what actions would expose any injustices: probably the best method would depend on the circumstances. I had much yet to learn about the life of the Aborigines. But, thanks to this Tingha visit, I had met individual Aboriginal people who not only demonstrated their sensitive family ties but also accepted themselves. It was exhilarating. All my middle-class fears of Aborigines had vanished. I would accept them just as they were.

That public opening of the suburban Armidale home had brought together the University of New England people busy in AAAA, and Professor A.P. Elkin of the Aborigines Welfare Board. Out of this academic contact, there grew an idea for two successive Adult Education weekend conferences in May 1959 and May 1960 at the Armidale campus, when the leaders of many rural 'assimilation associations' helping the riverbank *murris* would confront the responsible officials of the state welfare boards with some open discussion of state policies, on the 'cross-cultural debate' principle. There we met Ruth Fink and Charles Rowley (then Principal of the Australian School of Pacific Administration in Sydney).

Diane McEachern (not yet Barwick), whom the *kooris* in Fitzroy, Melbourne, first met in October 1960, was still making Aboriginal friendships and writing her notes when she was invited to speak at the third FCAATSI conference in Brisbane at Easter 1961. Her talk, on the Canadian Indians of the west coast, had her audience enthralled: it was possibly the first time that Aboriginal radicals had listened, without scoffing, to any anthropology. In FCAATSI executive members suddenly became aware of our lack of knowledge in this field, and through Judy Inglis, Lester Hiatt and Marie Reay we learnt much about the mutual obligations of Aboriginal kinship and totems, and the distribution of the tribes right across Australia. Through many conversations with Aboriginal men and women in New South Wales I was slowly gaining in my mind a picture of the past, but it was years later, in 1968, that Professor W.E.H. Stanner opened up the questions of post-1788 Aboriginal history.⁷

It was Diane Barwick's influence that ensured that the scholarly history, while being strictly fair to the motives of both sides, would show more clearly how it looked to Aboriginal eyes.

⁷ Stanner 1968.

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