

The imprimatur of Charles Perkins on *Aboriginal History*

Perhaps more than anyone else in 200 years, Charles Perkins changed the ways other Australians thought about Aboriginal people and the way Aboriginal people perceived themselves. Certainly when Peter Corris and I discussed founding a journal of Aboriginal history in the early to mid-1960s it was difficult to arouse interest. Historians were largely apathetic and anthropologists actually opposed the idea. One senior anthropologist told me that such a journal would raise expectations in the community at large and eventually backfire against Aborigines who were not able to live up to these expectations. Certainly those who had the best interests of the Aboriginal people at heart and who influenced official policy – such as Paul Hasluck, WH Stanner and HC Coombs – were committed to an assimilation policy, and much Aboriginal policy reflected the mistaken conclusions of the Porteus intelligence tests and the negative paternalism of the missions. Indeed the lack of a sense of self-direction in many Aboriginal communities was so frustrating that a Maori activist friend, afterwards the Hon. Whetu Tirikatene-Sullivan, a minister in the New Zealand government 1972-75, who had been trained as a social worker, told me that she gave up in despair any attempts to get the Aboriginal groups she met with to act for themselves in matters of social justice.

After Charles Perkins organised the freedom rides around western New South Wales towns in 1965 the climate gradually changed. Even before this, organisations such as Abschol were beginning to make a difference. In 1965 I was elected chairman of the National Aborigines Day Observance Committee (NADOC) of the ACT, an organisation supported by the churches and service clubs to promote the interests of the Aboriginal people. From 1965 to 1968 we had a very active committee providing speakers and promoting books, school essays and an annual bark painting exhibition on National Aborigines Day in July. In 1968 the climate had so changed that we felt that it was no longer appropriate that a committee such as NADOC should be run by European Australians and we made arrangements to hand over the running of National Aborigines Day in Canberra to the newly formed Aboriginal group, the Kanangra Society.

Peter Corris and I had never given up the idea of Aboriginal history and after Peter removed to Sydney I had further talks with Bob Reece who had joined the Department of Pacific History. Nevertheless, as I chaired a committee that was voting itself out of office in favour of Aboriginal leadership and direction, I did wonder about the appropriateness of founding a journal of Aboriginal history. The idea of the journal was therefore very much in the background when I went down to Sydney to see Charles Perkins. I told him that our NADOC committee was disbanding but that there was a lot of goodwill and that I would like to know what we could do to help the Aboriginal

cause. After some general discussion which provided no solution he suddenly said to my surprise 'You're a historian aren't you, do something about Aboriginal history'.

Here was the imprimatur enabling us to revive the idea of Aboriginal history. Charles Perkins had given the idea his blessing without any prompting or prior knowledge. We had a mandate to go ahead. The idea was to model the new journal on *The Journal of Pacific History* of which I was an editor. Funding was the major problem but Peter Grimshaw, then Business Manager of the Joint Schools, proved a valuable ally and convinced the Director of the Research School of Pacific Studies to make a grant available. Bob Reece and I appointed ourselves editors and wrote to all those we thought would support the venture. By then the climate had so changed, following the Perkins era, that there was almost complete support from the historians and anthropologists canvassed. Initially we planned to confine the journal to historians but with Peter Corris being in Sydney, Bob and I invited Diane Barwick to be an editor and we also agreed to make the journal interdisciplinary. Diane, who was to become principal editor, brought with her a notable band of female scholars affectionately known as the 'sisterhood' and provided a colophon of excellence to accompany Charles Perkins' imprimatur.

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