

Introduction

This volume of *Aboriginal History* commemorates the contribution of Kwementyaye¹ Perkins (1936–2000) to what was once called Aboriginal advancement. When Perkins emerged as an activist for Aboriginal rights in the late 1950s, Aboriginal ‘advancement’ was the polite, non-controversial word in vogue for granting Aborigines (and also Torres Strait Islanders) the same range of freedoms that all other Australians enjoyed. It was Perkins more than anyone else who ensured that ‘political movement’ was the term that over the next decade supplanted ‘advancement’. Under his leadership the demands of the Aboriginal political movement became ever more confident, more strident, more vociferous, more articulate and more assertive about achieving its goals. As a result of his influence, the Aboriginal political movement transcended the category ‘Aboriginal’ as he and his contemporaries forced it into the mainstream of Australian state and national politics. After Perkins strode on to the national stage in 1965 by leading the ‘Freedom Riders’ through northern New South Wales, Australian politics could never be the same again. It was to be but the first of his many grand symbolic and often controversial gestures that followed over the next 35 years.

This volume of the journal includes three obituaries for Kwementyaye Perkins by three professional historians who knew him well. Their testimonies to him suggest something of the breadth of his contribution to Australian politics generally and to the Aboriginal political movement in particular. Gordon Briscoe’s memoir recalls how he and Perkins shared a large part of their childhood together in Adelaide in the St Francis Anglican home for boys of part-Aboriginal descent. Gordon, several years younger than Kwementyaye, followed him into professional soccer then Aboriginal politics and eventually university studies. As Gordon’s obituary indicates, Kwementyaye’s agenda was the broadest possible: he not only wished to make Aboriginal politics a national issue but also wanted to change non-Aboriginal society. Niel Gunson’s obituary recalls how Kwementyaye was the critical influence behind the establishment of this journal in 1977. Kwementyaye was not just the only Aboriginal member of *Aboriginal History*’s foundation 16-person national committee. As Niel points out, he had been the very inspiration behind the journal’s foundation several years earlier. In her memoir Ann Curthoys, who participated in the Freedom Ride, recalls how Kwementyaye and that now legendary event affected his, her and their fellow riders’ lives, and also beyond them, the Australian political landscape. She concludes with a lament that is peculiarly apt for Kwementyaye Perkins – ‘he is no longer around to provoke, irritate, and inspire us all’.

¹. Previously known as Charles.

Volume 24's subject matter ranges far and wide across Aboriginal Studies and Australia, as befits an edition dedicated to the memory of Kwementyaye Perkins. Robert Foster writes on the colonisation of Aboriginal labour. Karl Neuenfeldt and Kathleen Oien discuss music and Aboriginal identity. Frank Bongiorno — in examining the work of the poet Bernard O'Dowd — examines the link between Aboriginality and the development of historical consciousness. Pamela Smith considers aspects of Kimberley district history in two articles, the first on Aboriginal resistance to the invasion of the Sturt Creek basin and the second on labour relations on pastoral leasehold properties. Minoru Hokari revisits the Gurindji walk-off from Wave Hill through oral history. Murray Johnson re-examines the debate over the 'Talgai skull' in Queensland. Bob Petersen considers early Aboriginal education in New South Wales. John Morris explores Tiwi memories of the whites who lived among them while shooting buffaloes. In a tribute to the late Isobel ('Sally') White held over from Volume 23, Isabel McBryde uses the instance of the travels of the Diyari and other peoples to show how humans and trade goods moving across a landscape follow cultural as well as geographical routes, and how these cultural routes are interpreted again in new values and meanings as 'heritage'. Geoff Gray traces the history of anthropological investigation among southeastern Australian Aborigines. Brian Egloff explores the legal aspects of Aboriginal fishing on the New South Wales south coast. Stephanie Anderson uses French historical sources to re-examine the encounters between Tasmanian Aborigines and members of the d'Entrecasteaux expedition. Finally, Benjamin Smith probes the idea of a 'tribal resurgence' on Cape York Peninsula.

The diversity of Volume 24's articles reflects the complexities of Aboriginal history. Aboriginal history cannot be reduced to the simplistic assumptions that have characterised much public debate over Aboriginality since the rise of 'Hansonism' in 1996. Perhaps Hansonism was a sign of a general hardening of hearts in 'middle' Australia in the years since the Keating Labor government set up the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation in 1991. Hansonism was soon followed by the emergence of a wider 'Right' revisionist opinion engineering on Aboriginal history. The debate continues and voices for the Right abound. Every issue relating to Aboriginal history calls them forth. They are heard most notably in 'opinion pieces' by self-appointed experts in the major dailies. Here, to take a recent instance, commentators from the Right proclaim that, because Lowitja O'Donoghue seems to have been placed in the Colebrook Home by her white father, she was of neither the 'stolen' nor 'removed' generations of Aboriginal children. The Monash historian of Aboriginal society, Bain Attwood, protests that

little of the history written during the past 20 years or so by historians has been read beyond the academy. Instead, public debate is increasingly dominated by writers who have no historical training, who have never practised as historians or who are new to the field of Aboriginal history. Many are journalists ... who have fashioned themselves as specialists in Aboriginal affairs and who seem to assume that history is little more than a form of journalism and so something they can readily do.²

Readers of and contributors to this journal are unlikely to disagree with Attwood.

2. Bain Attwood, 'Culture war fed by sloppy practice', in *The Australian* Thursday 26 April 2001, p 6.

However, neither his views nor theirs are likely to deter those seeking to denigrate the Aboriginal political movement, of which Kwoyemtyaye Perkins was a paramount champion.

Meanwhile, the monthly journal *Quadrant* provides a forum for such views from the 'Right'. In its April 2001 edition, for instance, its editorial denied the notion of a 'stolen generation'. Using semantic and legalistic technicalities, it justified excluding O'Donoghue from either the 'stolen' or 'removed' generations. It seemed oblivious of the possibility of a broader 'big picture' — that by whatever name we call it, the experience of O'Donoghue and other part-Aborigines who grew up separated from their families in orphanage-type institutions was, in the late Kevin Gilbert's words, 'a rape of the soul so profound'.

Wishing to 'do more' for Aboriginal History, this journal would like to see debate widen. In forthcoming editions *Aboriginal History* will accordingly explore a range of historiographical issues. Starting with an examination of the discourse on genocide in Volume 25 (2001), the journal will go on to consider further issues in subsequent volumes. These will include perspectives on Aboriginal history of the 'new conservatism'; historians of Aborigines in the public arena; myth making in Aboriginal history; and Aboriginal history in the context of historical theory. *Aboriginal History* invites prospective authors to participate in the debate by contributing articles on historiographical issues. A guide to the issues being covered may be obtained from the editor by email at: ian.willis@anu.edu.au or iwillis@ozemail.com.au.

Extreme hostility for the Aboriginal political movement is hard to explain. Unfortunately, as Attwood observes, the views often aired in *Quadrant* and the opinion columns of the daily newspapers pass for history but remain uninformed by the large and continually accumulating body of scholarly writing on Aboriginal history. That is not the fault of either historians of the Aborigines or the journals to which they contribute. Unlike journalists and newspapers, historians and historical journals do not generally court controversy, nor is controversy their currency. Their obligation is to explore, assess and present the infinite complexities of the past that the articles within this volume of *Aboriginal History* so clearly reflect.

Fortunately, the hostile commentators have not gone unchallenged. The political scientist Robert Manne, editor of *Quadrant* before it began attacking the Aboriginal political movement, has recently published a long essay, *In denial: the stolen generation and the right*,³ exploring the motives of the revisionists who deny the notion of 'stolen generations'. Meanwhile the historian Inga Clendinnen contributed a long article⁴ to the May 2001 edition of *The Australian Review of Books* in response to earlier articles by various revisionists. Her theme is that 'to be able to judge the morality of historical events, one must never lose sight of the intentions of the people involved in those actions.'⁵

3. Robert Manne (2001) *In denial: the stolen generation and the right*, The Australian Quarterly Essay, Issue 1, Schwartz publishing Pty Ltd, Melbourne.

4. Inga Clendinnen (2001) 'First contact', in *The Australian Review of Books* May: 6-7, 26.

5. *Ibid.*: 6.

Kwementyaye Perkins appreciated the value for Aborigines of an expanding volume of historical writing. He told Niel Gunson when approached for advice on what Niel might do to help the Aboriginal cause, 'You're an historian. Do something about Aboriginal history!' It was advice that this journal was proud to take in its formative years, and continues to heed.

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