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Preface

Commemorations, myths and new histories

Could it possibly be that in the year marking the 40th anniversary of the 1967 Referendum we are witnessing the symbolic eclipse of that referendum? Once it was widely held that the referendum made Indigenous people Australian citizens by giving them the vote or by counting them in the national census or by somehow bestowing (unspecified) citizenship rights. It was also believed that the referendum gave the Commonwealth the power to control Aboriginal affairs, a prerogative, which, if true, the federal government has been reluctant to exercise. If, as Reconciliation Australia now says,¹ the referendum conferred neither citizenship nor Commonwealth power, its remaining significance can only be attributed to the fact that over 90 per cent of the Australian electorate voted in favour of ridding the Australian Constitution of two discriminatory clauses. And this, of course, is sufficient reason for the referendum to be remembered in its own right, though Reconciliation Australia chooses to interpret it 'as the first stage of the reconciliation movement in Australia'.²

The 1967 Referendum illustrates the processes typically involved in commemoration: events can always be fashioned and refashioned to suit current sensibilities and purposes. When certain stories – such as the association between the referendum and citizenship – become outmoded or are found not to stand up to close scrutiny, new stories and new ideas can be attached to the event.

Thus, it was on 27 May 1997, the 30th anniversary of the referendum, that the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation³ deliberately connected the referendum with reconciliation by hosting the Australian Reconciliation Convention. And it was not by chance that the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission chose to launch its *Bringing them home* report just ahead of the convention, thereby linking the referendum to the issue of the Stolen Generations as well. And it was through his refusal to offer an apology to those generations and their families at the convention that the then Prime Minister, John Howard, inadvertently cemented the association between the referendum, reconciliation and the Stolen Generations.

If the deeds of the Federal Parliament are anything to go by, the 1967 referendum may soon be supplanted entirely in the Australian collective memory by the issue of

1. Reconciliation Australia 2007, 'Fact Sheet: The 1967 Referendum: Important Facts and Interesting Pieces of Information'.

2. Available at www.reconciliation.org.au/i-cms.jsp (accessed 17/12/2007).

3. The Council was established by federal legislation in 1991 for a period of ten years. Reconciliation Australia was set up to continue the work of the council with funding from the federal government, but is not an agency of the federal government.

saying sorry. In 1997 the parliament marked the 30th anniversary of the referendum by debating the meanings of both the referendum and 'practical reconciliation', while this year it chose instead to observe the 10th anniversary of the *Bringing them home* report by debating the merits of making an apology. Reconciliation Australia chose to celebrate all those who made the outcome of the referendum possible in a weekend of festivities with the theme of 'Their Spirit Still Shines', at Old Parliament House: by all accounts, a splendid (though none too political) time was had by all.

We end 2007 with the prospect of an apology to the Stolen Generations; we can look forward as well to some amelioration of the Howard Government's intervention in the Northern Territory and to some new Indigenous consultative body that may give the Rudd Government some independent, timely and sage advice.

Each of the articles in this volume sheds light on a range of subjects that have hitherto received little attention. In a finely researched and argued piece, 'The polemics of fishing', **Rebe Taylor** revisits a long-debated issue, concerning the history of fish eating by Tasmania's Indigenous people. She considers whether, in coming to his interpretation of the archaeological evidence, Rhys Jones did not include oral evidence of eating fish contained in the Westlake Papers.

Reading the historical record in the way **Michael Bennett** has done for his article in this issue leaves no doubt about the long-standing and continuing importance of fish in the east-coast Aboriginal diet. He shows in 'The economics of fishing' that while many things changed in the lives of Aborigines on the south coast of New South Wales over the course of the 19th century – even the means for catching fish – fishing remains a constant.

Joanne Scott and **Ross Laurie** consider the (reluctant) participation of Aboriginal residents of Queensland missions in the annual agricultural shows of the early 20th century. To what degree were the artefacts they produced a marker of their assimilation into settler society? In their paper on dance, **Anna Haebich** and **Jodie Taylor** seem to be asking almost the opposite of this question: what motivates white dancers to imitate the moves of corroborees? Are these gestures towards inter-cultural goodwill or markers of an impoverished dominant culture? **Kelly Chaves** revisits an important but neglected case from early Australian legal history, *R v. Lowe*, which, as she says, 'helped to define the legal status of the Aborigines and raised questions about the extent of British sovereignty'. **Judith Littleton** reviews the historical record to unearth details of Indigenous burial practices.

David Trudinger examines the language of instruction for Indigenous children at Ernabella in the 1940s, where JRB Love, the superintendent, advocated English, while the teacher, Trudinger's father, championed Pitjantjatjara, at least for the first years at school. It proved to be a drawn-out and rather unholy contest with a number of unexpected twists and reversals.

Kitty Eggerking
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