Andrew Gunstone, founding editor of the *Journal of Indigenous Studies* has selected 18 papers that were published in that journal between 1999 and 2007 and he presents them as a *tour d’horizon* of Australian Indigenous Studies. What do we get?

Some essays look at history: Ros Kidd’s useful summary of the Queensland government’s systematic misappropriation of the earnings of Indigenous people under ‘the Act’; Glen Stasiuk’s exuberant evocation of the loyalty of ‘Aboriginal warriors’ – variously motivated, but persistent – to the military culture of those who colonised them (strangely, he omits the Native Mounted Police); Will Sanders on the Howard government’s attempt to reverse the ‘anti-colonial’ tendencies of Australian public policy. Two essays – by Gill Cowlishaw and by Shayme Breen – narrate and comment on the History Wars. ‘Neutral, disinterested inquiry’ is rare, observes Cowlishaw, ‘because of the emotional weight of Indigenous issues’ (p. 58). Shayne Breen does not seem to mind: his essay celebrates the black armband historians for creating ‘a cultural space that allowed Aborigines to tell their stories and to have their telling heard’ (p. 189).

In a retrospective on the Reconciliation Decade, Gunstone summarises what he found disappointing about the work of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation, 1991–2000. The Council’s education program was more about attitudes than about improving non-Indigenous knowledge; its vision of reconciliation did not include such Indigenous rights as their right to self-representation; socio-economic gaps between Indigenous and non-Indigenous did not diminish.

The health gaps to whose persistence Gunstone alludes are succinctly described by Ian Ring and Ngiare Brown (is it the same person as Ngaire Brown, mentioned p. 277?). Pointing to circulatory disease, injury, respiratory illness and diabetes, they insist that although we know how to diminish all four big killers, and although we have the health service policies that could deliver such progress, Australians have simply not yet allocated the resources required to make a difference. They lack the political will to promote health services more aggressively and to reconstruct the physical environments in which Indigenous
Australians live. Ring and Brown published this in 2003. I wonder what their assessment of the Northern Territory Emergency intervention that began in June of 2007, would be?

One could read Gunstone’s account of what ‘reconciliation’ was allowed (by the Australian government and by the Council itself) alongside Larissa Behrendt’s statement of her ‘vision of a reconciled Australia’. Behrendt’s vision is clearest when she deals with the law (referring to the Indigenous exercise of ‘the right to be economically self-sufficient’ (p. 232), she does not explain how, in practice, that could be). Her vision includes: some constitutional changes; a ‘return’ to ‘neutrality of the public service’ (p. 245) including restoration of its recently lost ‘corporate knowledge about Indigenous affairs’ (p. 246); and the ‘recognition of Indigenous jurisdiction’ based on ‘customary law’ (pp. 238–239) and on ‘the values that we claim as “Indigenous”’ (p. 242).

The restricted terms in which ‘Indigenous jurisdiction’ is understood by judges interpreting the Native Title Act 1993 is the topic of Wayne Atkinson’s angry essay on the Yorta Yorta claim: the Yorta Yorta were not able to satisfy judges that they were a group with an historically dynamic customary law. Craig Jones writes that the Native Title jurisdiction has the potential, in its mediation processes, to make room for the politics of the Aboriginal domain: the key conceptual move is for mediators to see the process as trilateral, not simply bilateral, because there are likely to be negotiations within the Indigenous side about how to deal with the non-Indigenous party. Thus ‘the goal of mediation is to produce outcomes under Australian and Aboriginal law’ (p. 262). Magistrate Kate Auty’s essay on the Shepparton Koori Court tells what it was like to work with the ‘elder or respected person’ and the ‘Aboriginal Justice Worker’ in that experiment. The values of this court were a product of cross-cultural exchange; she evokes the court as a conversation about sentencing as a solution to community problems. Perhaps Kooris felt ‘cultural safety’ in Auty’s courtroom. The concept is explained by Tangi Steen, Sydney Sparrow, Jenny Baker and Sharon Gollan; using focus groups, their research highlighted the ways that Indigenous students could experience a classroom as welcoming or forbidding.

The effect of reading Jones and Auty is to become aware of the small, localised and institution-specific ways that Aboriginal knowledge – what Aboriginal people know, now, about themselves and their environments – may be a force in contemporary Australian life. Other essays also deal with ‘knowledge’ as localised practice. John Morieson writes of the ‘astronomy of the Boorong’; he used fragmentary sources, including the oral heritage of Aborigines in Victoria’s Mallee country, to reconstruct how the night sky was understood by some Aboriginal people. Marlene Drysdale comments on the mutual learning between non-Indigenous nurses and Indigenous health workers in community clinics, lamenting that training of the latter is impeded by a lack of ‘consensus’ about their role. Bronwyn Fredericks and Leilani Pearce celebrate ‘Privileging the Voices of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community Controlled Health Service Sector’ in contemporary Queensland. If their account is right (and they are describing institutions in which they themselves give professional
leadership), then some agencies of the state have proved to be more permeable to Indigenous knowledge than the more holistic essays in this volume would make you think.

The two essays that attempt to give an account of ‘Indigenous knowledge’ as a distinct system are pitched in a language that is common to Philosophy as a discipline – such as ‘ontology’ and ‘epistemology’ – while insisting on the non-Western identity of the Indigenous system. Indeed, the essays by Arbon and Foley can be read as fervent statements of personal identity that employ the idiom of Philosophy (or Cosmology). In Veronica Arbon’s case, the sense of distinction is even more specific: not merely the ‘Indigenous’, but the Arabana, world-view. Having journeyed to the ‘ancient knowing of Indigenous people’, she states her need not to be ‘captured within the deep core of separation, domination and control lurking in western knowledge systems’ (p. 140). Similarly, Dennis Foley warns his reader not to let ‘Indigenous research’ be ‘tormented or classified in the physical and metaphysical distortions of … western approaches’. The other three essential features of ‘Indigenous Standpoint Theory’, as stated by Foley, are that ‘the practitioner must be Indigenous’; his/her research must benefit his/her community or the wider Indigenous community; and that ‘wherever possible the traditional language should be the first form of recording’. This is a demanding charter for Indigenous research – not least because the meaning of ‘be Indigenous’ and ‘benefit’ are debatable. Imagine a Journal of Indigenous Research dedicated to Foley’s four criteria. I am glad that Gunstone’s journal has adopted a more relaxed and pluralist approach to defining the field of Australian Indigenous Studies.

In his introduction, Gunstone refers to ‘Australian Indigenous Studies’ as an ‘academic discipline’ (p. xxvi). Yet his collection does not support that claim. Many disciplines appear in this book, with ‘Indigenous’ matters their topic of inquiry. Australian Indigenous Studies will best flourish if people recognise its intellectual plurality and refrain from systematising it and from writing as if one could legislate its borders.

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Peter Sutton’s *The Politics of Suffering: Indigenous Australia and the End of the Liberal Consensus* is a multi-faceted book: memoir, ethnography, policy critique and history. In reviewing it for *Aboriginal History*, I highlight the historical understanding that it develops and brings to bear on contemporary policy debates. The book could make three contributions to Australian historical research. First, it could introduce into the historians’ vocabulary the term ‘liberal consensus’ to describe what now appears to be an intelligible period of Australian Indigenous policy history: 1968–2000. Second, it highlights the resilience of Indigenous parental authority to colonial encroachment and invites a more complex explanation of Indigenous disadvantage. Third, it intensifies already existing doubts about using the gross categories ‘Indigenous’ and ‘non-Indigenous’ to denominate the actors in Australian colonial history.

In this review I will take up each of these issues. First, I argue that Sutton’s notion of ‘liberal consensus’ is incomplete and that he does not clearly distinguish between two ways that it might function in our historical understanding. Second, I argue that Sutton finds it difficult to assign weight to Indigenous parental authority and thus is not clear about what stance future governments should adopt towards it. Third, I conclude that Sutton is so committed to generalising about Indigenous culture and experience that he is unable to propose a convincing alternative to the categories assumed by identity politics and public policy discussion.

The book opens with a vignette of recent social change on Cape York – in particular the apparent rise in the incidence of homicide, suicide and rape among families known to Sutton ‘since the introduction of a regular alcohol supply in 1985’ (p. 1). He then states his thesis:

that a number of the serious problems Indigenous people face in Australia today arise from a complex joining together of recent, that is, post-conquest, historical factors of external impact, with a number of ancient, pre-existent social and cultural factors that have continued, transformed or intact, into the lives of people living today. The main ways these factors are continued is child-rearing. (p. 7)

Thus, a concern for children is in two ways central to Sutton’s book, and in distinguishing them I can begin to describe its underlying architecture as simultaneously an ethnography (of Indigenous Australia and of non-Indigenous good will) and a critique of some prevalent Australian notions of post-colonial fair play.
Ethnography as ethical reconnaissance

The first way that children figure is that Sutton – in common with many thinkers influenced by the psycho-analytic tradition – understands child socialisation to be a determinant of deeply entrenched cultural patterns. This theory of cultural reproduction is relevant to the extent that Indigenous Australians have successfully resisted transformation of their child socialisation practices. The second way that children matter in The Politics of Suffering is ethical: Sutton questions the priority that some have given to respecting ‘cultural differences and racially defined political autonomy’ rather than ‘a child’s basic human right to have love, wellbeing and safety’ – a priority that has displaced ‘care as the primary determinant of special helping measures for citizens in trouble’ (pp. 10–11). To be sure, children are not the only ‘citizens in trouble’: the well-being of ‘the unborn, infants, children, adolescents, the elderly, and adult women and men’ (p. 10) is a neglected priority, he says. Vulnerable children are nonetheless his recurring example of the disordered ethics that he wishes to challenge. In keeping with this dual significance of the child, The Politics of Suffering is a work both of social science and of ethical advocacy.

For anthropological writing to operate in both scientific and ethical registers is not unusual; at least since the rise of Boasian and Malinowskian alternatives to ‘racial science’, the discipline of Anthropology has been the site of a humanism that has been all the more robust for being grounded in the facts of authorial experience. Sutton puts his personal experience front and centre of his frequently autobiographical book, and those who have praised The Politics of Suffering in reviews have, correspondingly, evoked the author’s grieving witness as an assurance of the book’s integrity. That Anthropology has long embodied moral and civic pedagogy can be illustrated by the case of Ruth Benedict. She authored not only a seminal work in the ‘culture and personality’ approach to human diversity to which Sutton’s book is an intellectual heir (Patterns of Culture 1935) but also a book that held racial science to blame for racism (Race and Racism 1942) and declared ‘for or against, we must take sides. And the history of the future will differ according to the decision that we make’.1

In understanding The Politics of Suffering as a work in this anthropological tradition of ethical advocacy, it is important to take seriously Benedict’s mode of address: she challenges her readers to conceive themselves as poised to make a judgment and to decide an allegiance that will reform them and their world of relationships. Sutton does this too, continually prodding the reader to be reflexive about three ways of thinking that we might take for granted: first, categorical thinking that substantiates ‘Indigenous/non-Indigenous’ and makes sense of individuality in terms of each individual being either Indigenous or non-Indigenous; second, ‘cultural relativism’; and third, ‘social justice’. Critical of the grip that these three ways of thinking have on our political imagination, Sutton has written a polemical ethnography of recent Australian liberal sensibility.

Let me expand a little on his three targets.

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1 Benedict 1942: 3.
First, Indigenous/non-Indigenous. It is fundamental to his social philosophy that Sutton seeks ‘a better balance between the collective and the personal than we have achieved in recent decades’ (p. 164). Exemplary of the ‘personal’, as he has experienced it, is the quotidian ‘coalface caring business’ (p. 11) of service providers in troubled communities. He himself has been a carer. On Cape York in 1976, he combined field work with ‘running a basic [non-profit] food store (the protein was all hunted), and administering the Flying Doctor medical kit’ (p. 24) – anthropological compassion later gratefully and publicly acknowledged by Gladys Tybingoompa (p. 32). In Chapter 7 he extols ‘the personal’ against the ‘corporate’ or ‘collective’ by evoking a series of friendships between anthropologists and informants – relationships that are not intelligible in the categories made available by identity politics. In his final chapter he criticises ‘Reconciliation’ as a civic ideal founded in a flawed schema of collective ‘Indigenous’ and collective ‘non-Indigenous’ agencies.

Second, ‘cultural relativism’. If the conceptual alternative that twentieth century anthropology offered to ‘race’ was ‘culture’, the ideological alternative that it offered to ‘racism’ was ‘cultural relativism’. As Sutton says, cultural relativism has been ‘not merely … an intellectual or scientific standpoint but also a moral stance, a kind of scientifically underpinned engine of tolerance’ (p. 144). Sutton is wary of cultural relativism because of its ethical crudity (it makes no distinction between the predatory and the vulnerable members of a culture, its indiscriminate tolerance is not bounded by respect for universal human values). He is clearly annoyed and frustrated by the self-satisfied subjectivities that he sees as characteristic of ‘cultural relativism’, and his many critical passages on the culture of ‘cultural relativism’ – if I can put it in that way – have enlivened the reception of his work. Cultural relativism thrives partly on its psychological rewards (he sees it as ‘self-redemptive’, p. 11). However, Sutton’s philosophical assessment of ‘cultural relativism’ is not necessarily negative, and it is more subtle than his strictures on cultural relativists would imply. ‘Its virtues and vices depend on the context we want to apply it to, and it can’t be damned or praised for itself alone, free of context’ (p. 162).

Third, as well as mocking the ethical simple-mindedness of many adherents of ‘cultural relativism’ Sutton takes aim at another flawed ethical formation: an overstated regard for ‘social justice’ as a matter of ‘politics and law’. That concern is also rewarding for those immersed in it; it is ‘geared to creating benefits for politically or bureaucratically active adults, in the first instance’, it bestows ‘political glamour’ and it is ‘career-enhancing’ (pp. 10–12). Sutton believes that the instruments of a properly ethical concern for Aborigines are not ‘politics and law’ but actions that work at the level of ‘the personal’ (p. 12).

One vehicle for Sutton’s ethical commitments is his historical account of what he calls ‘the liberal consensus’.

The ‘liberal consensus’ and its history

The ‘liberal consensus’ combined naïve cultural relativism with an optimistic projection of the possibilities of politics and law and assumed and revalued
the categorical distinction Indigenous/non-Indigenous. The ‘liberal consensus’ became influential, Sutton suggests, between 1968 and 1974 and it set the terms of public discussion until 1999–2000. Sutton summarises it thus:

[Aboriginal] communities should be free of mission or state governance, self-managed through elected councils and relatively autonomous. Land rights would ensure their inhabitants security of tenure and, where possible, a source of income. Traditional culture would be encouraged, not discouraged. Pressures to assimilate to a Euro-Australian way of life were racist and should be curtailed. Liberation, not retraining, … would lift people’s self-respect and pride, and enable them to embark on a new era in which the quality of their lives would improve. There was an expectation that collective decision-making would be based on a regard for the good of the community. Health would improve through better access to services and a power shift from government health agencies to those who came to form the Indigenous health industry. (p. 17)

This is accurate as far as it goes. However, Sutton has omitted two crucial items in the ‘liberal consensus’ that emerged from 1968 to 1974.

One was the doctrine of anti-discrimination. This had many legal and policy manifestations before 1968, including the release of Aborigines from many restrictions on their behaviour, such as legally withholding the right to vote and to drink alcohol. In the period 1968–1974, the achievements of ‘anti-discrimination’ were largely to do with empowering Aborigines as consumers, with the standardisation of wages and welfare payments to Indigenous Australians. The achievement of formal equivalence in such income entitlements in these years consummated Paul Hasluck’s policy of assimilation, a legacy welcomed by those who also held the convictions Sutton describes as the ‘liberal consensus’. One feature of the termination of the ‘liberal consensus’ is that it has again become respectable to advocate, if only as an ‘emergency’ measure, racial discrimination in welfare entitlements.

The second idea that Sutton omits from his summary of the ‘liberal consensus’ was the conviction that the new, post-assimilation mode of Indigenous advancement would be enabled by public funds flowing through government agencies to Aboriginal organisations that would be set up (under Fraser government legislation in 1976) to provide health, schooling, housing and other essential services. To omit this second item from the ‘liberal consensus’ renders incomplete – to say the least – Sutton’s account (pp. 17–41) of how that consensus came ‘undone’, for that conviction was always, in one respect, fragile. Whether governments spend too much or too little on assistance to Indigenous Australians has been persistently at issue since the Whitlam government. The question has been polled since the 1960s, and these polls have consistently revealed respondent dissensus. Australians have been divided about Indigenous entitlement to financial support. The ‘liberal consensus’ – in the augmented sense that, I suggest, is more accurate historically – was thus highly vulnerable to that current of Australian opinion that has long been suspicious of tax-funded state support for vulnerable people. Aborigines have been a prime example for
those who view the interventionist welfare state as an expensive mistake. By omitting this taxation/entitlement theme from his account of liberal political culture, Sutton has reduced the plausibility of his history, in Chapter 1, of the ‘shattered orthodoxy’ (p. 17).

The history of the dissolution of the ‘liberal consensus’ that Sutton presents in his first chapter is an engaging memoir of his own presence in Queensland communities (from June 1970), as the ‘liberal consensus’ changed the ways of administration 1968–1974. Recalling the solidarities and enmities that these changes occasioned among the non-Aboriginal residents of Cape York, he also offers vignettes of Aboriginal activists, including admiring sketches of the emerging political sophisticates Marcia Langton and Noel Pearson. Comparing ‘old and new’ Aboriginal activism in the 1990s, he contrasts the ‘old’ concern for the ‘symbolic and rights agenda’ and the new emphasis on ‘quality-of-life issues’ and appreciation of ‘the complex pragmatics of governance’ (p. 31). The pertinence of this emerging agenda, Sutton suggests, was that, as a result of the ‘liberal consensus’, living conditions on Aboriginal communities were less monitored for adherence to hygiene standards and there was a ‘decline in the standard of living and safety’ (p. 31). A growing research literature described these bad conditions, though Sutton is silent on whether the authors explained them as a consequence of the ‘liberal consensus’. That explanation, with which Sutton has some sympathy, began to be circulated by Noel Pearson from 1999, and by 2005 it had achieved wide credibility. Sutton describes one impact of this historical narrative – that the ideas and practices of the ‘liberal consensus’ had inflicted unintended suffering on Indigenous Australians – as ‘a fair amount of catharsis’ (p. 33) and as a ‘wave of unusual honesty and self-examination’ (p. 41). Journalists who had seen the world through the terms of the ‘liberal consensus’ were ceasing to do so. In this refreshed climate of discussion, ‘taboos’ on public discussion of ‘political morality, personal morality and cultural values’ were set aside (p. 35). In the controversy about the Howard government’s Northern Territory intervention in 2007, principles of ‘political rights’ were trumped by declarations of humanitarian intent. There is now no ‘political consensus on Australian Indigenous policy’ (p. 40). Much later in the book, when discussing whether and in what respects Aboriginal customary law should be recognised, Sutton argues that the ‘liberal consensus’ has become vulnerable also because the Aboriginal domain that it values has itself been changing. At least, this is what I think he is referring to when he writes: ‘wider demographic, cultural and social changes are working to hasten the decline and fall of the kind of strong relativism that informed liberal progressive opinion in the 1970s’ (p. 160).

Two histories are at play in Sutton’s story of the successful challenging of the ‘liberal consensus’: a narrative of the declining influence of a set of ideas (the ‘liberal consensus’); and a narrative of the degrading impact of policies favoured by the ‘liberal consensus’ on Aboriginal communities. He puts more effort into setting out the first history, an evocative tale of people he has met and of political scenes in which he has participated. In addressing the second history, he does not clearly distinguish two propositions: that the ‘liberal consensus’ inhibited our public recognition that conditions on some Aboriginal communities are very
bad and not improving; and Noel Pearson’s thesis that the application of the ‘liberal consensus’ to public policy caused the degradation of these Aboriginal communities’ conditions of life.

The first proposition is plausible: reading Sutton enables me to see how my hopes framed in terms of the ‘liberal consensus’ have led me to highlight the potential of Indigenous agency; when confronted by instances of Indigenous stupidity, greed, mental illness, treachery, violence, laziness and apathy, it was tempting to treat these qualities as marginal and/or as the fading legacies of colonisation. It has been refreshing to be able to acknowledge, publicly, that the difficulties of realising the hopes promoted by the ‘liberal consensus’ point, in part, to unmet Indigenous responsibilities and to cultural and historical explanations of flawed Indigenous agency.

However, a reader will be disappointed if he/she expects Sutton to expound the argument that the application of the ‘liberal consensus’ to public policy caused ‘the downward spiral since the 1970s’ – the Pearson thesis that has played so well in the press since 2000. Sutton implies some sympathy for the Pearson thesis, though his formulations are notably cautious – ‘many agreed that this was an important part of the truth’ (p. 49) and ‘there was an apparent correlation between the progressiveness of policy and the degree of community disaster’ (p. 55). Where Sutton differs from Pearson is in the weight that he gives to persistent Indigenous authority structures.

As Sutton tells the story, there was a ‘breakdown in social control in a number of Aboriginal settlements’ as state and church, in the period 1968–1974, withdrew or redesigned their authority. I understand him to qualify his account of state and church withdrawal when he suggests that the administration of goods and services in Aboriginal communities has remained ‘functionally, not politically, by non-Indigenes’ (p. 56) – not necessarily officials of state or church, to be sure. At the same time as non-Indigenous authority was receding and/or changing its forms, access to alcohol improved (and Sutton recalls his own hospitality on Cape York). According to the ‘liberal consensus’, the destiny of resurgent Aboriginal authority was to deal with these new circumstances. What Aboriginal authority was there?

Sutton’s answer to this question – crucial to his story, one would think – is curiously indirect, piecemeal and scattered throughout the book. He briefly mentions household ‘matriarchy’ as a newly significant formation. He implies that surviving Aboriginal custom was strong enough to make it difficult to establish the legitimacy, in Indigenous eyes, of incorporated Aboriginal organisations with codes of responsibility that could contradict obligations to kin (p. 81). At the same time, he assures us, many Indigenous people have embraced modern ways, including formal organisations. His main point about Indigenous authority, in the era of ‘liberal consensus’, is that it was able to resist colonial influence: it has proven robust, and the forms of its persistence worry him. For example, in the Western Desert, it remains realistic for Aboriginal people to fear that they will be ‘strangled for religious misbehaviours’ (p. 79). The persistence of customary Indigenous authority is mainly to be found, he says, in the ways
that parents raise children. The effect of persisting approaches to child-rearing becomes a central topic, running through Chapter 3: ‘[S]ome very deeply seated and old cultural conceptions of power, obligation and economy’ (p. 64) have determined how Aborigines have responded to the circumstances of the late twentieth century.

Sutton is committed to the view that child socialisation reproduces Indigenous culture. In some Indigenous families, he suggests, the socialisation process has recently so miscarried that it has produced young adults who can be effective in terms of neither Indigenous nor non-Indigenous expectations. Some contemporary adults can function in Indigenous society but, unlike their own parents who had long contact with white employers, missionaries or officials, they lack the cognitive and emotional skills to go beyond the regional Aboriginal domain. Some young people have been socialised to drink alcohol in destructive ways. Sutton is worried that where Indigenous child socialisation processes persist, they reproduce maladaptive behaviour. He chides adherents of the ‘liberal consensus’ for being blind to the significance, in determining Indigenous disadvantage, of such cultural factors as: egalitarian social organisation; power structures that encourage dependency; family loyalties; certain beliefs about the causes of illness; minimal hygiene practices; demand sharing and the rejection of accumulation; use of physical force in disputes; fatalism and a sense of an unchanging world (p. 85). Children still learn these patterns of culture, and what they learn, Sutton argues, disables their engagement as adults with the wider Australian society and sometimes with their own.

In underlining these cultural factors as real and persistent determinants of behaviour, Sutton is correcting what he sees as the blindness of the ‘liberal consensus’ to cultural explanations of disadvantage. Accepting that corrective, we are nonetheless left with the question: are these major or minor determinants of persistent Indigenous disadvantage? This is a difficult question to answer in a generalised way, as Sutton rightly points out, but it is not a question that he can evade. Weighing the causal importance of culture and thus the relevance of cultural factors to government intervention is a difficult intellectual task. While Sutton urges it upon those whom he criticises (see pp. 123–126, for example) it is a challenge that he himself can defer, as long as he preoccupies himself with the idiocies of the ‘liberal consensus’. It is surprising to me (though evidently gratifying to such reviewers as Christopher Pearson) that the ‘liberal consensus’ as a (‘stupid’) structure of perception and feeling occupies so many scornfully worded pages in Sutton’s book. As long as non-Indigenous self-delusion is his theme, rather than assessing ‘Indigenous culture’ as a phenomenon in history, he can rub our liberal noses in problematic features of Indigenous culture, without saying how important they are in determining what Indigenous people and governments now do.

Perhaps the best that can be achieved, by way of an explanatory model, is to say that certain contemporary circumstances have interacted with certain inherited dispositions to produce damaging patterns of behaviour. When Sutton commented on Gillian Cowlishaw’s critiques of his work in 2005, he suggested
that wherever limited colonisation had left much of the Indigenous socialisation processes intact, it was not plausible to explain violent behaviour as primarily a response to imposed colonial conditions:

in my view [violence] is rooted much more immediately in the dynamic local polity of competitive interpersonal and gender relationships, in a cultural world where jealous rage is not normally suppressed during child socialisation, where berserks are legitimated childhood reactions to thwarted desires, where, under recently sedentary conditions, dispersal is no longer the favoured option during conflict, and where drugs, especially alcohol, act as disinhibitors for strong emotions. In other words, it is rooted much less in realms of broader social control and colonial resistance, with their loaded hints of collective good, and much more in the struggle of the person.2

Consistent with this, in Sutton’s powerful review of archaeologies, histories and ethnographies of violence among Aborigines (Chapter 4 of The Politics of Suffering), he suggests that male violence against women ‘is found at its most extreme in communities that have remained closest to their cultural traditions, and where alcohol is available in quantity’ (p. 101). He adduces his Aurukun data to illustrate such a place (though he does not compare it with a community that has not remained close to their cultural traditions). Of all the elements in the ‘liberal consensus’ that could be reassessed, now, as damaging mistakes, the legislated end of restrictions on Aborigines’ access to alcohol emerges, in Sutton’s book, as the most consequential misjudgment. Paternalistic and discriminatory though they may have been in intention and effect, there were social benefits in the laws, institutional structures and patterns of settlement that mobilised racial/cultural criteria to apportion unevenly the liberty to drink. We can’t go back to those days, writes Sutton. However, nor is he attracted to any of the current ‘collectivist’ solutions to the alcohol abuse problem, such as zoning communities as grog-free and restricting retail supply. The solutions that interest him are characteristically in the realm of the personal, the helpful dyad: he commends one-to-one talks between patients and their doctors as prompts to self-reform.

Sutton’s wariness of the collective and the corporate is consistent with his suspicion of histories that assume the centrality of government policy in the determination of Indigenous well-being. Consider the logic of Sutton’s emphasis, in his history of Indigenous Australia since the 1960s, on the persistence of cultural factors. To the extent that they are the major reason for persistent Indigenous disadvantage, then the causal importance of other factors is diminished. Perhaps the revised modes of government and church presence, approved by the ‘liberal consensus’, were not so important? Perhaps no imaginable configuration of polity and economy would have saved Aborigines from their maladaptive cultural patterns? Or perhaps we need to distinguish among the policies approved by the ‘liberal consensus’, weighing the causal importance of different policies and

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highlighting those that interacted powerfully and perversely with features of Indigenous culture. Policies that had the effect of improving Indigenous access to alcohol emerge in Sutton’s account as particularly important.

**Causal models and the politics of intervention**

Sutton gives us good reason for wanting a causal model that is clear about the relative weights of Indigenous culture and non-Indigenous policy in the generation of misery: such a model is relevant to our assessment of what, if anything, changes in government practices could achieve. Reading his chapter on health policy, I sensed that Sutton is troubled by the question of the relevance of government. On the one hand, Indigenous culture, he says, is much less accessible to deliberated manipulation and critical self-reflection than government policies are. On the other hand, he alludes to the possibility of ‘remov[ing] by appropriate interventions’ unhygienic customary practices (p. 122); and he attributes real health benefits and lasting behavioural change to some of the practices enforced under assimilation (p. 132). He acknowledges the possibility that external initiatives to promote changes in Aboriginal behaviour will resonate with ‘traditional Aboriginal values’ and thus be accepted (pp. 133, 136–137). To assign great causal significance to entrenched, socialised Indigenous culture is not necessarily to diminish one’s hopes in what governments may do. Sutton’s emphasis on cultural determinants could nonetheless nurture that worm of doubt within the ‘liberal consensus’ to which I drew attention above: if what governments do or provide is of little consequence, why spend so much ‘tax-payers’ money’ on public provision?

Sutton generally seems to be more interventionist than such welfare state sceptics: he would direct more expenditure to health promotion, that is, to adult education for behavioural change (p. 141, and see Sutton’s op-ed piece in *The Australian*, 30 September 2009). He even goes so far as to say that ‘the cycle of childhood socialisation needs to be re-geared’ – a metaphor that does not illuminate the imagined mechanism of social engineering (p. 143). However, he has no proposals to make about schooling, and (remarkable in a book so concerned with child socialisation) the term ‘education’ does not appear in his index.

In a 2005 paper, Sutton explained that his underlying policy preference was for ‘a fundamental reversal of interventionism’. As he explained:

I support greater intervention where there is, for example, an unmet need to protect vulnerable individuals. This need has been increasing in recent decades, and interventionist strategies have been increasingly a matter of demand from Aborigines, not just from members of the wider society. But in the longer term I consider it false to assume that more intervention will remove the underlying factors at work. In that sense I question the present vast intervention of an officially maintained and publicly funded organisational racial separatism. That includes
being in favour of a gradual withdrawal of non-essential services from settlements and institutions which, without it, would have to make more of their own way in the world, perhaps even sink or swim.3

Sutton is not a policy nihilist but an advocate of the broad thrust of late Howard government and Rudd government policies towards remote and very remote Indigenous communities: questioning subsidised spatial separation and encouraging population concentration, and promoting engagement with the mainstream labour market. To the extent that such policies give rise to more ‘vulnerable individuals’, this policy stance could exacerbate Sutton’s ambivalence towards state ‘intervention’ into Indigenous lives. Opportunities for ‘coal-face caring’ may proliferate.

Reconciliation: the dance of the categories

Sutton closes with a critique of reconciliation that, while suggestive and thought-provoking, is bedevilled by a tension that runs through the whole book. As I pointed out above, in his critique of social justice/politics/law, Sutton wishes to revalue the personal and to question the collective or corporate as vectors of action and feeling. The categorical habits of Australia’s contemporary languages of social analysis and civic concern arouse his suspicion repeatedly throughout the book: needs for care, he protests, will not be grasped through narratives of colonial history ordered in the generalised terminology of identity politics. Conflicts, solidarities and grievances are matters of local configuration, scenes deeply susceptible to the projects and personalities of the individuals present. This ontology of the local is integral to Sutton’s anthropological humanism. ‘Reconciliation’ thus strikes him as a particularly ill-conceived project, because, via national apologies and possibly reparations, it seeks to bring into a condition of empathy two nation-wide categories of Australians. The project tends to institutionalise the categories, he argues, as much perpetuating as overcoming their estrangement.

The official creation of this parallel universe of Indigenous/non-Indigenous functions, committees, boards and programs creates a career structure such that those who want to tread this ladder of success are easily wedded to the continuance of racial division, and indeed to the status of victimhood that prompted the compensatory acts in the first place. If one’s career is wedded to suffering and its compensation, then there cannot be an easily accepted endpoint for special status as victim. Victimhood thus becomes, for many, the family business, a business of status as well as of economics. (p. 205)

What is more, he goes on to say, such a project cannot work emotionally. Insofar as ‘reconciliation’ is emotional work, it is ‘a state of being between persons, or a resolution of issues within one’s consciousness’ that are independent of the measured gaps between the two statistical entities: Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australia.

3 Sutton 2005: 40.
At this point, while continuing to discuss emotions, Sutton changes his argument. From asserting – credibly – that there cannot be empathy between gross statistical entities, only empathy between individual human beings, he shifts to saying that there are huge emotional differences between Aborigines and other Australians. That is, having just critiqued categories, he reinstates them to remark that Aborigines and other Australians have ‘quite opposed ways of responding with the feelings’.

The visceral intensity of a remote Aboriginal settlement is almost impossible to describe. It is also pretty well invisible to the casual outside visitor, until the lid blows off. There are cross-cultural limits to empathy, and thus to real mutual recognition. (p. 206)

Thus one of Sutton’s most powerful reasons for disbelieving in ‘reconciliation’ is his experience of the radical emotional alterity of Aborigines: it stands ‘in the way of better mutual acceptance’ (p. 207).

This is strikingly categorical thinking, albeit anchored in Sutton’s experience of particular places. Its presence within a chapter that is, ostensibly, so opposed to categorical thinking gives one pause. It is clear from reviews, with their concern to evoke Sutton as a man who was ‘there’, at troubled Aurukun, that the credibility of The Politics of Suffering rests partly on our willingness to accept that Sutton’s witnessing of particular places at particular times is a reliable source of knowledge of Indigenous Australia and of its relationship with non-Indigenous Australia. Certain versions of categorical thinking may strike Sutton as implausible and artificial, and well may he say that formal reconciliation ‘politicizes and collectivizes the very things that need to be dealt with by individuals’ (p. 209), but his book demonstrates the limited relevance, to Sutton himself, of such an atomising paradigm of relatedness. He is deeply committed to a generalised model of Indigenous sociality, based largely on what he has found, as field-worker, in many remote and very remote Aboriginal communities. The Politics of Suffering has been welcomed or refused in the terms that he offered it: generalising representation of some abiding and widespread characteristics of Indigenous Australia.

References


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As he has done before, Bain Attwood extends to his readers the courtesy of locating his authorial position – not native born, in fact raised and educated in New Zealand, a country which has long had a Treaty with its Indigenous people, a Treaty which dates from the same period as Batman’s treaty with our Indigenous people, which he is about to examine in this book. He does not accord this latter treaty the status of capitalisation, and I will follow him in this. He sets out his starting point simply:

A sense of legitimacy is crucial to nations since this is what gives them their staying power. All nations have problematic beginnings and have to undergo a transition from de facto coercive power to de jure authority ... The principal challenge to the Australian nation’s sense of itself as morally good has lain in the knowledge that the land was, and perhaps still is, someone else’s, and that it was taken without the Aboriginal people’s consent. (p. 5)

Attwood takes two foundational ‘legends’ as he calls them, Batman’s treaty, and Batman’s statement that ‘This will be the place for a village’, and subjects them to the most rigorous scrutiny – how they were produced, how they were remembered, re-invented, inverted, criticised, memorialised and finally undermined by the emergence of the sub-discipline of Aboriginal History together with political activism: it is magisterial in scope.

In this work Attwood uses a number of concepts familiar to historians, foundational history, monumental history, antiquarian history, but in following Nietzsche (pp. 6–7), he goes beyond what many were trained to believe is the historian’s job – to understand and explain the past – and takes a loftier stance from which critical history is more or less equated with moral judgment. He is persuasive.

The book is divided into three parts. Part 1 examines the perspectives and the expectations of all players, the land owners (Attwood follows Barwick’s account4), the Port Phillip Association, Governors Arthur and Bourke, the imperial government: in addition, it locates Batman’s treaty within the wider context of William Penn’s Treaty of 1683, and notes that Batman was hailed as the ‘Tasmanian Penn’. This connection is important in explaining how what was essentially a land purchase attempt became known as a treaty. By far the most powerful section of Part 1, in my view, is the meticulous teasing out of the shift in meaning of sovereignty. Quickly disposing of Terra nullius as a much later invention, he asks on what grounds did the British claim sovereignty and answers that it is still not clear (p. 73). There were three traditional ways, conquest, cession and occupation of a literally uninhabited land (which Australia clearly

4 See Barwick 1984.
was not). In a beautiful piece of historical research Attwood demonstrates the shift in meaning from sovereignty as a concept related to people, to sovereignty as a concept related to territory (pp. 72–82). I disagree though with the statement that ‘There are no reasons for arguing that the Colonial Office or the colonial government were in favour of upholding Aboriginal rights to land in any real sense’ (p. 87). Under the Squatting Act, one of the functions of the Commissioners of Crown Land together with their Border Police was to protect the rights of Aborigines in distant parts of the country: half the expense of the Border Police was considered to be incurred on behalf of the Aborigines.

Part 2 ‘Legend making’ is a grand tour through every mention of the treaty over the 100 years to 1935, the apogee of the legend (p. 229), with numerous illustrations, detailed examinations of the waves of interpretations of Batman, a history lesson in itself which tells us more probably than we thought we needed to know, but which sets up Part 3 ‘Remembering history’, to my way of thinking, the most significant part of the book, and the most heartening. In Part 2, Attwood is persuasive that it was James Bonwick who was most influential in constructing the Batman legend, and all subsequent writers take their position in relation to him.

Part 3 documents the unsettling of the foundational legends by the rise of Aboriginal activism, the political scene, the Mabo case, the struggle for a real Treaty, the Bicentennial protests, the ‘black armband’.

The weakest part of the book in my view, is in Part 1 – ‘The Kulin’s treaty’ (pp. 52–58) in which Attwood, though basically following Barwick, is forced into imagining responses, when there actually is evidence, though as yet unpublished. Two of the signatories were the Boon Wurrung clan heads, Kollorlook and Budgery Tom, prominent in the records of the Assistant Protector William Thomas, and there are records of the Port Phillip people’s opinion of Batman and of the deal they got, and their reciprocal response: on 13 September 1840 they related to Thomas all the good services they had done for the whites under the treaty, including that they had killed no-one, and now the government (unlike Batman) was saying stay away from Melbourne. The population figures 50,000 to 100,000 for Victoria, and 1500 to 2500 for the Woiwurung, are exaggerated; it would have been of benefit to include the mechanics of dispossession which Ian Clark has listed; the map of Kulin territory misrepresents Boon Wurrung territory on the east and the west.

It is easy though, to criticise a book for what is not there – overall, this book is a wonderful addition to knowledge, referenced minutely and beautifully produced in typical Miegunyah Press style.

Reference


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In substance, Unfinished Business picks up where Attwood (see above review of Possession: Batman’s Treaty and the Matter of History by Bain Attwood) left off, though not in a chronological sense. Gunstone’s book is the second edition of a work published first in 2007, itself developed from a PhD thesis. The underlying substantive issue, the elephant in the room, is sovereignty, that same issue with which imperial Britain and colonial Australia contended in the early nineteenth century (and with which both continue to grapple, in Britain’s debate on the Lisbon Treaty, and Australia’s debate on border protection). In Australia, sovereignty and its meanings underpin both the Indigenous demands for a treaty, and successive federal governments’ refusal or inability to negotiate such.

Gunstone’s central purpose in this book is to explore the ten-year formal process of reconciliation (p. 5). He commences with the Hawke government’s position in the late 1980s, facing general public apathy and racism, facing poor outcomes of previous policies in Indigenous health, education, and so on, facing as well, Indigenous hostility because Labor had abandoned its promises to recognise land rights and negotiate a treaty. Instead of land rights and a treaty, the government proposed a formal reconciliation process, to extend over ten years, intended to culminate in the centenary of Federation in 2001. Reconciliation was not achieved, and Gunstone in this book shows why and how the process failed.

Gunstone sees three streams of writing about this failed reconciliation process, for which he uses the terms conservative, progressive and critical and gives thumbnail sketches (p. 3). Conservative writers focus on practical reconciliation, dismiss ‘black armband’ revisionist history, and locate reconciliation within the framework of a united Australia. Progressive writers recognise the importance of symbolism, but a perceived greater need for a national identity has resulted in some progressive writing being critical of Indigenous claims to sovereignty and the need for a treaty. Gunstone locates himself within the critical stream, stressing the importance of recognising and protecting Indigenous rights – rights possessed by Indigenous people by virtue of being the original inhabitants of this country (p. 4).

The starting point for the reconciliation process was the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation Act 1991 (p. 49) passed with bi-partisan support. The three broad goals of the overall process of reconciliation were:

- education of the whole community
- a national commitment to address disadvantage
- some type of formal document.

But from the very start, one of the provisions of the Act – that the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation (CAR) seek advice mainly from the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC – in whose elections only a minority
of Indigenous people participated, averaging 22.9 per cent for the decade) – precluded the CAR from benefiting from that widespread Indigenous opinion outside ATSIC which advocated rights based on sovereignty (pp. 53–54). Further, the CAR’s own Vision Statement ignored matters such as sovereignty, land rights, self-determination and a treaty, which could not be fitted into a nationalist framework of reconciliation (p. 57).

*Mabo* changed things in a positive way, mainly because Prime Minister Keating linked the decision with reconciliation in his landmark Redfern speech of December 1992. But *Mabo* and the *Native Title Act* of 1993 taken together, lost the coalition support which the cause of reconciliation had previously enjoyed (p. 71), and things got tougher for the cause of reconciliation with the election in 1996 of the Howard government which rejected self-determination in favour of practical measures to address practical problems.

Gunstone sees the CAR education program as basically a failure (Chapter 3), because more emphasis was placed on changing community attitudes with slogans rather than educating with factual information about the historical, political and moral consequences of white settlement: he uses the terms invasion, massacres, genocide (p. 160). The section in Chapter 3 entitled ‘Numerous definitions’ is particularly telling.

In Chapter 4 Gunstone concludes that not only did socio-economic conditions not improve, in some areas they went backward, and this, even in spite of a sympathetic government for the first five years, and a government allegedly offering practical solutions to practical problems for the second five years of the ten-year process towards reconciliation. And in Chapter 5, he judges that the CAR did not achieve its goal in the document it produced because that document failed to reflect adequately the broad range of Indigenous opinion (p. 237).

Gunstone has produced an excellent and necessary record of the ten-year process towards reconciliation: he has done a valuable service. But it is a bleak record, and Gunstone’s is, I suspect, a less than measured critique. Even in the account of the Sydney Harbour Bridge walk (and the other walks around Australia), which received huge publicity, with numerous first hand personal narratives published in newspapers, and shown on all television channels, Gunstone has selected negative evidence to quote (pp. 89, 116–117). In selecting thus, he has done a dis-service, in my view, because critical history is rendered more powerful when it treats even handedly a position opposed to the author’s.

There is no arguing though with the conclusion – neither government has achieved success in the tackling the fundamental Indigenous demands for self-determination, land rights and treaty. Contrary to the author’s position, I do not see sovereignty as belonging conceptually with this trio: in my view, it is the concept of sovereignty which underpins these three claims, and reconciliation is a possible outcome of reaching a shared understanding, agreement even.
The unfinished business of this book is the business of the future – the national conversation about the multiple meanings of sovereignty: it has started already in *Sovereign Subjects* (reviewed in *Aboriginal History*, vol 32, 2008).\(^5\)

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\(^5\) Moreton-Robinson 2007.

In Convincing Ground, Bruce Pascoe invites his readers to join him in exploring the experiences of Indigenous Australians through the brutal period of colonisation and conquest, focusing on the experiences of the Gundidjmara people in western Victoria in the 1830s and 1840s but drawing connections with Indigenous experiences in other parts of Australia. These are juxtaposed with Pascoe’s commentary on recent politics concerning race and human rights in Australia. The title, ‘Convincing Ground’, refers to the site of one of the earliest documented massacres in Victoria where sealers contested the ownership of a whale carcass that had washed up on the beach near Portland by firing on a large group of Gundidjmara people who had gathered to feast on it. By foregrounding such stories he urges readers to consider how they so often contradict the legacy of mainstream Australian history noting that, ‘Too often Aboriginal Australians have been asked to accept an insulting history and a public record which bears no resemblance to the lives they have experienced’ (p. ix). Convincing Ground presents a history where contemporary Indigenous Australians, and those who may not identify as such but have some Indigenous ancestry, can recognise connections between this history and their own family histories.

The book presents an assortment of frontier stories, drawn from a wide range of sources including letters, diaries and newspaper reports. It juxtaposes these with Pascoe’s personal accounts of interactions with individuals he encountered in the course of the research. Running through all these stories is a deep empathy for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous individuals battling hardships of different kinds and a genuine endeavour to comprehend the circumstances of their lives and their actions. While the stories help to understand conflict over land, they also reveal something of what the land was like at the time of colonisation and the kinds of livelihoods that it supported. Not only do we get a sense of how life changed for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, we also gain insights into the enormous transformations of the land itself throughout this period.

Pascoe bluntly appraises the character and morals of those who committed atrocities against Indigenous people as well as the administrators and magistrates who declined to implement principles of justice as they were understood at the time. These include prominent figures such as Governor La Trobe, Geelong Police Magistrate Foster Fyans and Joseph Tice Gellibrand of the Port Phillip Association, who played instrumental roles in wresting land from the Kulin nation. The unrelenting theme shaping relationships between settlers and Indigenous nations during this period was the promotion of economic interests in land over and above most other concerns. Even well-educated advocates for Indigenous people, such as James Dawson, a squatter whose detailed descriptions of the Gundidjmara stone houses, language and culture reveal both an interest in and engagement with local people, shared the dominant view that European occupation of their lands was justified by the overriding economic good of developing land for agriculture. Pascoe asks,
If Dawson, one of the few to understand the complicated system of clan boundaries and land obligations, saw no flaw in the imperial principle of forced land usurpation then what hope was there for justice to survive, or even arrive? (p. 35)

Pascoe’s work is infused by a larger concern with the contradictory morals he finds in the recorded events and attitudes of colonial Australia and how, in many ways, some of these contradictions are still with us. While the book is anchored in his detailed research of historical records for western Victoria, and his own experiences in tracing frontier stories, its canvas is much larger, engaging with issues of national history and national identity. By better understanding, not just violence and racial prejudice, but the conflicting rationales used to justify it, Pascoe hopes we will be better able to engage with current contradictions around human rights and national identity.

For me, the most poignant passages were those where Pascoe describes attempts by himself and two Gundidjmara elders to join in the 150th birthday celebrations of the Cape Otway Lightstation, only to be met with hostility by some members of the organising committee (p. 136). These accounts highlight some of the practices that privilege the perspectives of the colonisers in the writing and celebration of Australian history. To what extent are these exclusionary impulses enacted all over Australia in numerous but often mundane ways? What will it take to shift this dynamic and what might be achieved by doing so? Less engaging were the links made sporadically throughout the book’s 20 chapters between historical events and events in recent Australian politics. These sometimes seemed too far a stretch to be meaningful and in any case may have been better left for the reader to draw. However the final chapter, where Pascoe states his case for interrogating the ‘airbrushed’ parts of Australia’s history so that we may learn ‘to love our country rather than our lifestyles’, makes compelling reading and captures the imagination with possibilities for the future. Through this book *Convincing Ground*, Pascoe seeks to open up Australia’s contact history for a much wider range of people to engage with. Describing himself as ‘a mug historian with no training’ (p. 200), he issues his readers with an invitation and a challenge,

The field of research of these and other events is open to any who care to spend their time and intellect in the pursuit. Many leads will prove false, but others will tell us more about the Silent War, about who we are. (p. 201)

Reference


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Twenty years ago, in an essay titled ‘Para-ethnography’, the anthropologist Eric Michaels expressed scepticism about the emergence of the concept of ‘Aboriginality’. For reasons that will become apparent, Martin Nakata’s book led me to revisit Michaels’ critique and to query the etymology of the term. According to the Macquarie Dictionary, early use of the word occurred in the Bulletin magazine. ‘Aboriginalities’ was the title of a regular feature consisting of ‘a colloquial anecdote about Australian Aborigines or Australian bush subjects in general’. Given that the Bulletin for much of its life carried the slogan ‘Australia for the White Man’ on the masthead, the genesis of the term is queer indeed. Yet it may not have surprised Michaels whose essay was a response to Sally Morgan’s My Place a book he criticised for its ‘deceptively frank autobiographical style’. Her unpacking of her family history, resulting in the triumphant discovery of her grandmother’s Aboriginal origins, seemed highly suspect to Michaels, not only for the incorporation of theosophy, New Age astrology and other ‘interesting syncretisms’ into Morgan’s account of being Aboriginal, but also for the seamlessness with which her new-found Aboriginality erased her non-Aboriginal ancestry. Michaels said of Morgan’s memoir and of Bruce Chatwin’s The Songlines (also analysed in his essay) that they contribute to ‘discourses of modern ‘pan-Aboriginality,’ a recent social construction characterized by denying the local particularity of past (and many contemporary) societies, their languages and law’.

As we know, Aboriginality lost none of its currency in the wake of this critique. Indeed, it appeared ever more commonly in public debates and became a widely accepted term in Australian English. Yet in recent years a new form of subjectivity – or at least a new descriptor – has been on the ascendant. I refer to ‘Indigeneity’, a neologism that has increased in currency as the adjective ‘indigenous’ becomes ever more reified (to the extent that one risks chastisement for using it without a capital ‘I’). Eric Michaels never lived to see this development, but it seems to me that his original criticism has only grown in value. If a modern, publicly digestible notion of Aboriginality threatened to homogenise the perception of Australia’s heterodox Aboriginal cultures, what are we to make of an essentialised ‘Indigeneity’ that transfers this normalising ambition to the entirety of the globe? Are there sufficient similarities between a Celt, a Samoan and a Kalahari Bushman for a transcendental notion of ‘Indigeneity’ to be even vaguely useful?

That the rhetoric of ‘Indigeneity’ effaces distinctions between the cultures it purportedly valorises is particularly evident in the Australian context where a capitalised ‘Indigenous’ is fast becoming synonymous with ‘Aboriginal’ (a
term, I realise, that is not without its problems). In the process, the distinctive Melanesian culture of the Torres Strait Islanders (TSI), which the term ‘Indigenous Australians’ was originally intended to include, is – yet again – elided. Such falling between the cracks is not uncommon where minority groups sit within broader minority classifications. The Islander population resident in the Torres Strait is 6958. They live for the most part on just a handful of the 270 islands, many of them now unoccupied.8

With the lingering complexities persisting from the colonial era and its subsequent – if only partial – unravelling, a degree of osmosis between Aboriginal and TSI cultures is almost inevitable. The High Court of Australia’s Mabo judgement is the most prominent in terms of national history, resulting as it did from a unique configuration of cultural differences and affinities. Eddie Mabo and his fellow litigants were able to prove their ownership under common law of ancestral territory in the Torres Strait by documenting their hereditary rights to gardens over many generations. The High Court then extended these native title rights to the Aboriginal peoples of the Commonwealth, despite the fact that traditionally they had never been gardeners or tillers of the soil.

The Mabo decision is spectacular but exceptional. For the most part, the intercultural traffic has gone the other way. This is essential background to Martin Nakata’s analysis of the formation of Islander identities. Disciplining the Savages: Savaging the Disciplines is in part an interrogation of educational policy and its many limitations in negotiating cultural difference. There is an autobiographical thread here, sketched briefly in the opening pages. Nakata was born to a Japanese father and a mother of mixed Samoan and Islander heritage. Education was valorised within the family and he attended Catholic and state schools on Thursday Island.

As he progressed through the educational system, he lurched awkwardly between various models of pedagogy. On the island, he had teachers ‘who probably did not know we existed until they found out they had a transfer to the region’. The Torres Strait Creole spoken locally was not understood by teachers, nor even recognised as a language. The final years of high school he spent on mainland North Queensland ‘where I understood nothing of what the teacher was teaching’ (pp. 6–7). Remarkably, he went on to tertiary study in Adelaide where he experienced sympathy and understanding, but also a degree of isolation familiar to many Indigenous students. As he began to investigate the pedagogic models developed for remote communities, staring in the face the dumbed-down Aboriginal or Islander student hypothesised by generations of educators, the seeds of his critique began to sprout. ‘My task was not simply to know my position but to know first how I was positioned in and by Western disciplines and knowledge practices.’ (p. 11) Little wonder that the book exhibits distrust of a one-size-fits-all ‘Indigeneity’.

The acknowledgements explain that substantial parts of the book are drawn from Nakata’s doctoral thesis, supervised by educationist Mary Kalantzis in the 1990s. From its beginnings as an interrogation of educational policy, it morphs into something bolder and grander: an argument with Western constructions of ‘the Primitive’. In particular, it addresses the quite extensive literature, ranging from anthropology to the (pseudo) sciences, concerning his own part of the world. But as occasion permits, he wanders more widely. Exploring the positioning of Islanders as ‘savages’ and the effect of these discourses upon Islanders’ lives in terms of governance and policy formation, the rubric is broadly Foucauldian, a debt signalled in the book’s title.

So Nakata begins his dance with the juggernaut of Western knowledge. The gang plank that gives him access is the six volumes of the Cambridge Anthropological Expedition to the Torres Strait of 1898, led by Alfred Court Haddon. The seven-month expedition is considered a pivotal event in the history of the social sciences, both for its ground-breaking use of film and phonography in an ethnographic context, and for its use of genealogies to map kinship, research undertaken by the psychologist WHR Rivers, the expedition’s most influential member.

The heart of the book is a survey of the linguistic, psychological, physiological and anthropological work carried out by the Cambridge team. Nakata is unsympathetic to their findings, redolent as they are with notions of nineteenth century savagery. As valuable as Rivers’ genealogies are to Islanders today, Nakata laments his distortion of data. His attempts to chart racial differences through the perception of colour is denounced as a ‘cardhouse of theory’ (p. 63). Curiously, I found the digest of the Cambridge expedition’s investigations rather more interesting than Nakata’s critique, much of which seemed rather obvious. Nakata does little of the legwork that we see, for example, in the anthropological histories of George Stocking, where discarded theories are situated intellectually and socially.

Despite his distaste, Nakata displays an almost compulsive interest in the work of the Cambridge investigators. That curiosity and the panoply of responses that result – ranging from exuberant dissection to sheer exasperation – create a distinctive spectacle for the reader. ‘Why are we so caught up in what others thought?’ he asks towards the end of the book (p. 170). He later explains the basis of his fascination, proposing that the Cambridge volumes should be ‘basic reading’ for Torres Strait Islanders. ‘What better way to develop critical reading skills, to gain some understanding of systems of thought and knowledge production and to anchor down a Torres Strait or Indigenous standpoint in students’ analyses of systems of thought and knowledge?’ (p. 195)

For a book concerned with Islander identities, there are very few Islander points of view other than those of the author. Apart from the Nakata family, only a couple of Islanders are named in the index. There is little flavour of the Torres Strait itself; not a sniff of salt or seaweed. Nakata is appreciative of more recent ethnographers such as Jeremy Beckett whose consultative methodologies
have resulted in persuasive accounts of Islander experiences and perspectives. But Nakata himself does very little in the way of opening up comparative world views. Islander epistemologies are not invoked to reveal the limitations of how Western knowledge approached them. For this reason, I came away with the feeling that the latter part of the book’s title, ‘Savaging the Disciplines’, was clever wordplay, though not particularly apposite. The almost punk aspiration of giving the disciplines a down-and-dirty savaging should leave some meat and bone on the faculty carpet. In truth, there is little of that.

Rather, as becomes evident towards the end of the book, the objective is to find an opening to the realities of Islander experience within the theoretical edifice itself. Instead of a savaging, this is more a contest by Queensberry Rules. In setting up a theory of what he calls the ‘Cultural Interface’ Nakata argues that it is possible to reconcile theory and lived experience for Islander subjects.

I have also progressively suggested that centralising Islanders as the agents of ongoing continuity in their everyday lives via the inclusion of their interpretation of their everyday experiences within the ongoing and changing order may go much further in providing more useful representations of Islander ‘realities’ and more useful knowledge about the positions of Islanders. (pp. 208–209)

It is a monster sentence, and it is not alone on that front. It comes in a part of the book that deals thoughtfully and subtly with the chauvinism he discerns in some Indigenous scholars who seek to write off Western knowledge and creativity holus bolus. But the moments of lucidity are often strangulated by the verbage.

Despite limitations that stem partly from a reluctance to shed its thesis origins, this is an important book: a sustained exploration of a significant body of anthropological literature from an Islander perspective. If, as I suspect is true, each book we write provides the scaffolding from which our next book is written, I am looking forward to the sequel. Perhaps it will bring about a re-deployment of the argument – not as a theoretical configuration, but through practice. There is rich material to be explored at this cultural interface, especially the responses of contemporary Islanders to the great harvest of film, photography, recorded sound and ethnological collections amassed by the visitors from Cambridge. They could well give rise to discussion that will allow a remarkable airing of voices. I imagine it as a dialogue diverse and yet euphonious.

Reference


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Is race a dirty word? Since the end of the Second World War it has been denounced, denied and euphemised. It has become, as Bronwen Douglas puts it, ‘all but unsayable’ in most academic discourses. And yet race has also continued to live a healthy existence within popular discourse. It has a powerful, if subverted, meaning within indigenous lexicons. And in the last decade there has been, as Douglas notes, a renewed scholarly interest in the history of the ‘pernicious consequences’ of racialist thought.

*Foreign Bodies* makes an important contribution to this more recent field of scholarly inquiry. It is, Chris Ballard explains, ‘the first attempt to assemble the writings of a group of scholars with a common interest in the history of racial thought in Oceania’. This scholarly group, made up Chris Ballard, Bronwen Douglas, Paul Turnbull, Stephanie Anderson, Helen Gardner, Christine Weir and Vicki Lucker, first began to work together on this project nearly a decade ago.

They did so aware they were breaking new ground, and were subsequently surprised at what they found: Oceania (defined as ‘stretching from the Hawaiian Islands in the north, to Indonesia in the west, coastal Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand in the south, and Easter Island in the east’) had played a more fundamental role in the development of metropolitan-centred, scientific ideas of race from the mid-eighteenth century then had been hitherto supposed. When this group then attempted to map this regional influence upon a more worldwide historical picture of the construction of race they were surprised again; by a general paucity of scholarly work that would make such a task possible.

The result, therefore, is more than a regional history, but an initial and significant remedy to a broader paucity in scholarly histories of the idea of race. By its very geographical focus *Foreign Bodies* cannot – as Douglas argues previous significant histories of race have done – focus almost exclusively on anglophone literature. Oceania was, she reminds us, originally a French cartographic vision and as such continues, as Ballard contends, to shape contemporary Polynesian identities. Douglas’ obvious fluency and familiarity with French language, thinkers and archives is usefully employed and ably demonstrated in her two impressive opening chapters. The first is, no less, a history of a European idea. Carefully and tenaciously, Douglas tackles the idea of race to reveal its historical, etymological and ontological ‘slipperiness’, and thus provides a much-needed broad historical template onto which she, and in turn the other contributors, can then map the ideas of race as they pertain to Oceania.

*Foreign Bodies* goes beyond its regional interest to offer to postcolonial and history of science writing a refreshing new understanding of the relationships between field and metropole and between European Enlightenment humanism,
colonial interests and scientific thought. The writers, in Douglas’ words, ‘refuse to explain away the science of race as a simple effect of particular European discourses or social, political, or colonial circumstances’. While they challenge, successfully, the ‘naturalness of race’ by revealing its historicity and many contradictions, the writers also oppose the idea, which so many popular and some academic histories purport, that the science of race (particularly from the mid-nineteenth century) was merely the handmaiden of colonialism; explaining and justifying conquest under the oft-used and irritatingly inaccurate heading of ‘Social Darwinism’. While coeval, Douglas explains, colonialism and the emergent science of race were ‘parallel but porous domains of praxis … linked by complex, ambiguous intersections and exchanges’.

Such an approach allows for the thinkers and writers about race to appear, throughout Foreign Bodies, not as an amorphous and unified mass, but as individual scholars whose own ideas at times developed, and who disagreed, often fiercely, with each other over questions of human difference. In a thorough and convincing chapter, Paul Turnbull effectively rectifies the widely held misconception that the demand for Aboriginal bodies in European centres was spurred solely by a desire to demonstrate Darwinian speciation. Turnbull reminds us that early Darwinists sought and used stolen Aboriginal bones to argue for descent from one ancestral form (monogeny) while members of the Anthropological Society of London sought the same material to demonstrate an aggressively antithetical idea that human origins were plural in their evolution (polygeny).

It is testimony to the sophistication of Foreign Bodies that the impact upon, and influence of, Christian philosophy to such radically challenging ideas is neither side-stepped nor sweepingly generalised as is so often the case in histories of science and of colonial discourse. In an outstanding chapter Helen Gardner traces the debates held throughout the nineteenth century as to whether some races lacked a ‘faculty of faith’; the capacity for religious belief or for conversion to Christianity. Gardner maps the role these debates also played within the ‘increasingly strident’ disputes between polygenists and monogenists, and their complex relationships with the British Evangelical missionary movement of the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century. Christine Weir then brings Oceanic missionary and race discourse into the early twentieth century in an excellent chapter exploring the ways Christian Pacific leaders utilised by-then normalised ideas of racial hierarchy to make morally charged calls to the white international community to assist in advancing the black Pacific.

In a scholarly history predominantly of white men and their ideas (the ‘foreign bodies’ in the title refer foremost to the Europeans in Oceania), it might be easy to overlook the experiences and influences of the studied subjects, but Stephanie Anderson’s chapter is a notable diversion from any such tendency. It is a poignant account of the 1885 meetings in Paris between local anthropologists and three Aboriginal people in Cunningham’s troupe. Anderson reproduces an engraving of Jenny, who, vulnerably topless, looks askance from the camera’s lens. ‘[W]e cannot now simply read her state of mind off the engravings’,


considers Anderson, ‘and yet we know that this woman has experienced the
deaths of most of her group during the tour’, as well as the imminent, or perhaps
recent, death of her husband. The subsequent reflections of anthropologist Paul
Topinard, invited to study Jenny’s racial typology, are moving to then read: ‘The
death of her husband … has not affected her, Mr Cunningham assures me. I am
not so sure … there is some kind of sadness about her’.

‘We do not pretend that the volume provides the final word’ on the history
of the science of race in Oceania, considers Chris Balllard, ‘but see it as also
plotting the outliers of a new archipelago of enquiry’. Certainly *Foreign Bodies*
achieves this rather modest statement; it makes an important, serious and
welcome contribution to the history of race and to colonial histories of Oceania.
It will prove essential reading to scholars in the field, and should be listed in
bibliographies and course guides dealing with indigenous histories, postcolonial
theory, and histories of the human sciences.

Rebe Taylor
University of Melbourne
This book is another in the series of excellent collections which have emerged from the conferences of the Australian Critical Race and Whiteness Association, and the work of Aileen Moreton-Robinson, Australia’s leading scholar of whiteness and founder of this organisation. Indeed, largely due to Moreton-Robinson’s influence, Australia has produced the largest body of whiteness scholarship outside the United States. And again like many of the previous collections, the introduction to this work sets out an exciting new agenda. The editors begin by noting that the aftermath of 9/11 has seen the emergence of a ‘global alliance of industrialized nations in which white people are culturally and economically dominant ... whose wealth was built on colonizing practices’. The claims to a race-blind ‘moral authority’ on which this alliance is based, highlights ‘how transnational whiteness can mobilize virtue when there is a perceived threat to its authority’. They go on to argue that the collection demonstrates that ‘whiteness is an imperial project that has undergone change over the centuries’, that it is ‘a transnational process of racialization’, one that ‘travels’, ‘within and across borders’. They note the collection primarily consists of studies of literary texts, but also make strong claims that there are ‘valuable historical studies’ as well. They particularly point to the absence of considerations of colonialism or indigenous dispossession within the dominant US whiteness literature (which is structured around slavery), a significant gap further elucidated in Aileen Moreton-Robinson’s chapter.

Strangely, however, given the collection’s title, and the rationale provided in the introduction, none of the individual chapters explicitly deploy the framework of transnationalism. Indeed, most are nationally bounded studies which present close analysis of a small number of texts. Even those which are not nationally based, do not position themselves as transnational, although some use a colonial frame. The collection’s claim to transnationalism lies in its inclusion of studies from a variety of contexts – Australia, South Africa, the United States, colonial India and the Pacific – not in the approaches adopted by the contributors. Despite this quirk, the collection contains much of interest, and the chapters are almost all of a high standard. Many do directly address the relationship between whiteness and virtue. It is this, and the way that most contributors draw on Aileen Moreton-Robinson’s work, which provides coherence to the volume.

The collection is divided into two sections. The first, ‘Whiteness in National Imaginaries’, opens with Tony da Silva’s fascinating analysis of ‘redeeming’ whiteness in post-Apartheid South African writing, particularly life writing. This is followed by Maryrose Casey’s insightful analysis of the ‘history wars’, and particularly Bain Atwood’s controversial treatment of ‘stolen generations’ narratives’, Jo Lampert’s discussion of whiteness-as-goodness in 9/11 children’s books, and Fiona Nicoll’s examination the coverage of Indigenous issues in the Australian in the early 2000s, which she argues uniformly represented the
nation as a ‘white possession’ and Indigenous men in particular as dangerous and incapable, both of which undermined any notion of Indigenous sovereignty. The section concludes with Aileen Moreton-Robinson’s survey of US whiteness scholarship – which elaborates on arguments she has mentioned briefly in previous work about how this has failed to take colonialism or Indigenous peoples into account. This she argues this has functioned to ‘displace Indigenous sovereignties and render them invisible’.

The second section, ‘Gendering Whiteness’, begins with Urbashi Barat’s discussion of whiteness in Kipling’s Kim and the Bengali author Tagore’s Gora (which was published shortly after Kim and possibly influenced by it). This returns to the relationship between whiteness and virtue and explores how whiteness has operated differently in India. Next is Suzanne Lynch’s exploration of racial production in Hannah Craft’s The Bondswoman’s Narrative, a fascinating text written by a ‘mixed-race’ slave (c1853–60), recently ‘discovered’ when it was purchased by Henry Louis Gates Jr. Lynch largely bypasses questions of truth-vs-fiction in order to explore what the text reveals about the ‘horizons of race’, resistance and instability. Martin Crotty explores white masculinity in Australian children’s adventure stories (1875–1920) and the possible synergies between the approaches of whiteness and gender studies. Tanya Serisier explores the intersections of whiteness, feminism and the politics of vulnerability, through the unlikely juxtaposition of a radio broadcast by Laura Bush following the invasion of Afghanistan, and Dan Brown’s novel Angels and Demons. In both, the ill-treatment of Muslim women is invoked in ways which support the war on terror. Finally, Annie Werner looks at tattooing as a marker of ‘savagery’ and the colonised other in white colonial literature, focusing on literature about the Pacific, but also observing how this trope emerged in the United States.

As the editors rightly note, there is a lot more to be done in exploring the transnational manifestations of whiteness, and its relationship to colonialism and the indigenous people. As with so many of these collections, the tantalisingly brief introduction touches on many significant issues about how whiteness ‘travels’ which need more in-depth treatment. It seems a missed opportunity that the chapters do not speak directly either to each or to the introduction. Strangely also, despite the claims to history which are emphasised in the introduction, the book does not engage with the small but significant body of historical scholarship on the transnational and colonial construction of whiteness, much of which has also emerged out of Australia, most notably the work of Warwick Anderson, Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds. There may be good reasons for this (one suspects this is a deliberate omission), but they are not explicitly discussed. Moreover, the historical studies included are confined entirely to literary studies. Nevertheless this array of studies does contribute to the understanding of whiteness as a global phenomenon, born out of European imperialism. Indeed, the quality of the national studies presented here gives one pause to wonder about the universal necessity of a transnational frame. There is still, it seems, an important place for the nation, and for empire, alongside the ‘transnational turn’.

Jane Carey
Monash University

Hoff has compiled a history of the Bundjalung people since European settlement which is richly annotated with firsthand accounts from early observers and illustrated with historical photos. Her history is far from objective with a liberal infusion of her own interpretations of what the Aboriginal characters in early cross-cultural encounters might have been thinking or feeling. For example ‘The warriors were probably pleased to see them gone … They were disturbed and curious about the large horned animals’ (p. 36).

Hoff interprets the past in the light of her deep admiration of the Bundjalung people and this is apparent throughout the book. For example, ‘they used their intelligence, superior strength and fitness and knowledge of the environment to co-exist with peaceful Europeans without giving up too much of their own culture’ (p. 43).

However despite a blatantly partisan approach, this book provides an engaging and informative read, and as one progresses through the volume it is clear that, in the main, Hoff has managed to infuse a balanced sense of humanity into both the accounts of settler interactions and responses and those of the Aboriginal landowners.

What was difficult for Bundjalung people to understand in the post invasion era was that these strangers – Irish, Scottish, English, German, French and so on had no specific beliefs in common … It seems that the gooris soon formed their own opinion of the white strangers integrity and acted on their own judgment. (p. 51)

Hoff maintains her unapologetic bias towards the Bundjalung people presumably in an attempt to redress biases in early ethnographic accounts. On the negative side, her approach builds in some traps for the unwary reader in separating fact from conjecture, especially where the thoughts and intentions of long dead people are assumed or interpreted. However on the positive side, the book is undeniably useful due to the wide range of historical and ethnographic sources used and the liberal use of direct quotations from these sources. In writing this history Hoff had the benefit of the rich resources of the Richmond River Historical Society as well as the oral tradition of the local Bundjalung people. The Richmond River Historical Society has built a strong reputation around both its extensive collections and its committed team of staff and volunteers. It has developed a strong, long-term relationship with members of the local Aboriginal community and this has borne fruit in initiatives such as this book and a number of recent exhibitions.

The Bundjalung people continue to maintain a vibrant oral tradition and no doubt it is in part due to the participation of a number of elders in informing Hoff’s
history that the author feels at liberty to present this heavily nuanced story of the Bundjalung’s first contact encounters, subsequent turmoil and ultimate survival. This last point is another that sets this ‘local history’ apart from so many others. So often where such histories do address the period of early settler-Aboriginal contact, they present Aboriginal culture as if it had ended somewhere in the past, lost on a vague and somewhat romantic ‘frontier’; sad accounts of a lost culture. In contrast while Bundjalung Jugun does not deny that the history of the Bundjalung people is to a large extent one of loss and tragedy, it is also presented as an undeniable story of survival and as a celebration of Bundjalung culture.

This book is a ‘must have’ for the bookshelves of anyone who is living or working in Bundjalung country. Its sometimes moralistic tone is far outweighed by its usefulness which is based on a wide review of historical sources that have been brought together in this volume.

Susan McIntyre-Tamwoy
School of Arts and Social Sciences
James Cook University
Beyond Awakening: The Aboriginal Tribes of North West Tasmania: A History by Ian McFarlane, xviii + 302 pp, jointly published by Fullers Bookshop, Riawunna and the Community, Place & Heritage Research Unit, University of Tasmania, Launceston, 2008, ISBN 9780980472004, $29.95.

The historical use and abuse of Tasmanian Aborigines has always been a political issue. The nineteenth century saw European assessments of the Tasmanians range from Rousseauian noble savages, to bloodthirsty barbarians, to pitiable remnants, doomed to inevitable extinction by their own weakness. Their designation as racially unfit served to underscore and justify the Tasmanian colonial project. A century later, they became a major focus of the ‘history wars’ as a conservative national administration resisted a full and frank address of Australia’s treatment of Indigenous Australians. Pervasive myths framed the Tasmanians as culturally stagnant, unable to make fire, unwilling to eat fish and willing to trade women to sealers and settlers. Single and often erroneous reports from one region were extrapolated throughout the island as the norm, assuming the mantle of fact.

In focusing on one regional area of Tasmania, Ian McFarlane exposes colonial and post-colonial mythmaking. The starting point for his study of the tribes of North West Tasmania is an assertion that cultural homogeneity – indeed, the very concept of Tasmanian Aboriginality – is a European construct. He does not explicitly seek to ‘correct’ conceptions on backwardness and racial unfitness, exemplified through the oft-cited references to fire and scale fish. Rather, McFarlane asserts that pre-contact Tasmanians were not one homogenous people, but instead comprised a culturally diverse ‘patchwork of mini-states’.

The first chapter of this book uses documentary and archaeological evidence to reconstruct the land and resource use, migration patterns and social organisation of the North West tribes, prior to European contact. Sweeping generalisations about this period led to the assumption of Tasmanian backwardness, and in addressing them, McFarlane’s approach is necessarily conservative. One by one, he takes on myths about Tasmanian Aboriginal culture. While resisting making absolute judgements, McFarlane makes a powerful case that the people of this region probably generated fire, likely ate scale fish, and almost certainly did not trade women to sealers. The importance to the study of Tasmanian history, and history in general, of this exhaustive examination into the habits of the North West tribes cannot be overstated. In correcting misconceptions about the occupants of one region, McFarlane ensures that the misinterpretations which for over a century blamed the Tasmanians for their own demise – namely, their evolutionary unfitness – are rendered obsolete.

A major focus of McFarlane’s study is the activities of the Van Diemen’s Land Company (VDLC), represented in the North West by Edward Curr. The VDLC figures largely as an instrument of dispossession and genocide. Its pastoral leases in the poorly surveyed North West, administered by a violent managerial attitude towards the Indigenous people, had a catastrophic effect
on the migration patterns, food resources and social organisation of the area’s tribes. Curr emerges from the documentary evidence as a brutal, genocidal actor in the dispossession of the people of the North West, and in the treatment of assigned workers (convicts). Curr openly proposed extermination as the best method of dealing with the Aboriginal ‘problem’, and the Directors of the VDLC, while paying lip service to the growing pressure for more humane treatment of Aborigines, allowed his practices to proceed from 1827 until 1842.

McFarlane’s examination of the VDLC’s systematic use of violence shines a light onto the lesser-acknowledged role of corporate enterprise in the dispossession of Tasmanian Aborigines. Better known, however, is the role of the colonial administration, in the form of conciliator George Augustus Robinson, appointed by Governor George Arthur to pacify tribal Tasmanians. Robinson’s interactions with the tribes of the North West are on the surface less violent, but ultimately more effective in moving towards the final goal of clearing the land for European settlement. With tactics ranging from false promises to the persuasion of the gun, Robinson removed to a series of offshore locations those whom Curr had been unable to remove. Robinson’s important role in the dispossession has been well told, thanks to his copious journals, but in focusing just on his interactions with the North West tribes, this book is able to personalise the event.

McFarlane uses the story of Parperloihener man Tunnerminnerwait (or Pevay) as a motif for gaining an insight into the experience of colonial contact on the people of the North West. As a child, Tunnerminnerwait was witness to VDLC’s policy of violence and massacre. As a teenager, he accompanied Robinson on his ‘Friendly Mission’ tours to make contact with Tasmanian Aborigines at large, and he saw his few remaining family members and friends taken into captivity. He travelled with Robinson to Hobart, then to Flinders Island, and eventually to Port Phillip, where he accompanied Robinson on an exploratory journey through Western Victoria in 1841. Finally, Tunnerminnerwait led a band of four other Tasmanians (including Trucannini) on a bid for freedom which culminated in the murder of two whalers and the death of Tunnerminnerwait and his friend Maulboyheener in Melbourne’s first public execution. Tunnerminnerwait emerges from Robinson’s journals, Melbourne’s newspapers and McFarlane’s _Beyond Awakening_ as the tragic yet enigmatically unbowed face of the North West tribes.

There is a time and a place for history writing which is methodologically conservative, and nowhere is this better illustrated than in McFarlane’s incisive study. _Beyond Awakening_ illustrates that a concise, systematic study of one group or area can greatly inform the broader picture. Through strict attention to sources, the avoiding of absolute judgements and a thorough presentation of evidence, McFarlane delivers an important addition to the body of knowledge on Tasmanian history – and, by extension, the history of colonial–Indigenous relations as a whole.

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Leonie Stevens
La Trobe University

The editors of this magnificent new edition of NJB Plomley’s Friendly Mission have usefully incorporated Plomley’s later additions and corrections, along with valuable new material and an expanded index. They have also chosen to preserve the first editor’s musings on his task. Plomley was less than sanguine about the utility of the project: Robinson ‘omitted much of what we would have liked to know, particularly in regard to the Aborigines, and his journals are slipshod, too wordy and too concerned with trivia’. He therefore toyed with an idea which, 50 years ago, must have looked beguilingly scientific:

Ideally, perhaps, one should abstract the facts from the journals and present them in an ordered arrangement under various subject headings, with necessary additions from other sources to link what Robinson had to say to other knowledge.

But ebullient Robinson resisted tabulation: after ‘several attempts ... to preserve the material in this way’ his editor regretfully re-committed to the classic editorial slog of decipherment, transcription and dedicated annotation. Plomley chafes at Robinson’s adventurous spelling, his idiosyncratic squiggles, his ‘verbosity, concern for trivia and failure to observe systematically’, while he transforms a self-indulgent, semi-private manuscript into a beautifully annotated, readable text while preserving its inimitable flavour and its diary form. History is full of close shaves.

I am personally grateful for Plomley’s heroic decision because I am addicted to reading Robinson, for his sturdy presence on the page; his comfortable conviction of God’s special favour; above all for the drifts of ethnographic detail which accumulate like autumn leaves as Robinson trudges along on his ‘friendly mission’ to Tasmania’s harried, hunted Aborigines. Chronically irritable with white assistants, convict or free (‘useless, refractory, contumelious petulent [sic]’), he is with Aborigines curious, patient and kind. He notes their moods, their forms of address, the details of their domestic economy; he remembers who is related to whom; he compiles his earnest wordlists. He also enjoys black company. At a place he will call ‘Friendly River’ he makes contact with a group of Port Davey blacks. His contact technique is simple: he simply ‘makes towards them’, and it works: ‘[The evening] was spent with great conviviality, singing and dancing to a late hour’. Then heavy rain comes on, and Robinson finds his improvised blanket-tent invaded: ‘several of the natives crawled under my blanket, together with the dogs belonging to them, so what with the knapsacks and them I was so crowded that I could scarcely move’. In the morning he discovers he is covered with lice, but that is nothing new: ‘I found it almost impossible to keep myself clear of vermin whilst laying around their fires and associating with them, as
I was obliged to do were I at all desirous of being successful among them’. Robinson accepts the dogs into his tent because he has come to understand how close they stand to their human owners. Later, on a crowded boat with some ‘sable companions’, ‘the people on board the _Tamar_ threw one of the native dogs overboard wilfully during the night’, and we can imagine why. But how many whites would have been attentive to the native response? Robinson is: ‘All the natives very uneasy about it. Jock the woman that owned the dog was in tears all day in consequence of it’. He also notices how eager even newly-contacted groups are to get their hands on English hunting dogs – dogs big enough not just to bail but to pull down a kangaroo. I was alerted to that hunger only when I read James Boyce’s revelatory *Van Diemen’s Land*, but there it was, lurking in Robinson all the time.

For whom is he writing? The idiosyncratic abbreviations, above all the luxuriant detail, suggest he is writing mainly for himself: to keep himself company through dark nights and days of rain; to burnish the mirror of self-regard – and also as an aide-mémoire for future importunings. This is a man of ‘humble origins’ recording what he believes to be heroic service which he hopes will see those origins eclipsed and transformed.

How ‘reliable’ is he? As reliable as self-love and self-interest allow. He reports, lushly, Indiana Jones-style adventures: see, for example, the mesmerising yarn he spins out of small events for the 21 October 1833 entry in the ‘Macquarie Harbour’ journal. ‘Trugernanna’, or as we know her ‘Truganini’ has the supporting role in that tale, which points to another rare quality: Robinson might talk more with men, but he spends much time with women. They are always towing him across rivers (Robinson cannot swim), guiding him along native paths or heading off into the bush to find him some supper.

Robinson likes the native Tasmanians. He enjoys their company. He also pities them: ‘Poor creatures! They are living without hope and without God in the world’. He shows us how desperate they are: how precarious their understanding of their threatened present, and of their baleful future. For a time he does his best to please, protect and to reassure them. For a time. Then self-interest and vanity pivot him from sympathy to a deliberate policy of deception, coercion and betrayal.

Over the last pages of his *Van Diemen’s Land* James Boyce has pieced together the coercion and the deceit by which Robinson, his sons and his agents rounded up the last of the western tribes, delivered them to locations judged too vile even for convicts and there abandoned them to death. Boyce acknowledges he was able to expose what he judges to be deliberate, racially-motivated ethnic cleansing (the white incomers having no interest in the ‘cleansed’ lands) and the frank acceptance of the extinction of a people by a close reading of Robinson’s journals. Robinson pities the people he betrays, but – recording his thoughts and actions with a kind of innocent confidence in the legitimacy of his secular
and social ambitions, reinforced by the reassurance of Governor Arthur’s covert support – he detaches himself from responsibility for them. As far as I know, no-one has yet availed themselves of this extraordinary opportunity to make an intimate study of evil actions made banal by thinking them so.

The uses to which the Robinson journals have been put have been multiple, and we cannot predict what they might yet be made to yield. Our debt to Plomley, to Quintus Publishing and to the Queen Victoria Art Museum and Art Gallery is immeasurable.

Reference


Inga Clendinnen
Melbourne

This is a handsomely designed and well-conceived companion for the republication of the incomparable Friendly Mission. Perhaps its title should not have echoed Inga Clendinnen’s essay title, ‘Reading Mr Robinson’, but rather been called Reading Friendly Mission, in recognition of both George Augustus Robinson and his indomitable editor NJB (Brian) Plomley. Through great labours, both men gave unparalleled representations of the first Tasmanians in Friendly Mission, which will endlessly challenge and intrigue all who venture within. The fact that there are 16 papers in this companion is invidious for both reviewer and reviewed, but detecting themes will assist.

The editors, Johnson and Rolls discover a ‘stifling parochialism’ in most approaches to Robinson’s journals and other colonial historiography. Alan Lester, Elizabeth Elbourne and Patrick Brantlinger are quick to counter that with a wider vision for Robinson’s work. Lester sets Robinson in a wider imperial framework and transcolonial debates between evangelicals and settlers about the fate of Indigenous peoples. He reveals how Robinson emerged from those debates, contributed to them, and rose in reputation and job status through them. Elbourne sees parallels between the Cape Colony and Van Diemen’s Land, marked as they were by land taking and labour coercion, and explores the comparisons and the connections between the colonies. She finds it remarkable that Keith Windschuttle gained so much attention here in questioning a violent frontier history, since the history of empire in the Cape and elsewhere is marked by obvious and endemic violence and brutality. Brantlinger discusses how James Bonwick’s writings and other colonial knowledge about Tasmanians built on Robinson’s work but without the same humanity.

The impact of Robinson’s work has been profound since it was opened to the world by Plomley in 1966, and many of the authors attest to its deeply personal effect on them. Lyndall Ryan who is unashamedly an admirer of Robinson as a witness and a man – a position I too hold – introduces us clearly and lucidly to the shifting historiography produced by historians of Tasmania and Robinson over a generation. Rebe Taylor reveals in excellent fashion how archaeologist Rhys Jones’ controversial and now discredited ‘regressive thesis’ of Aboriginal Tasmanian society, was inspired by his reading of Robinson’s journals – particularly Robinson’s silences, which proved to be a dangerous methodology for Jones to use in this case. Ian Macfarlane discusses the Cape Grim massacre and reveals how Robinson’s journals are vital to understanding the history of north-west Tasmania as the only other major archive is that of the Van Diemen’s Land Company papers – which was bent on utilising and taking Aboriginal land and its grasses. John Connor reveals how careful mining of Friendly Mission can reveal elements of the frontier war and Aboriginal experiences and perceptions of it. In all of these writings the History Wars lurk. Keith Windschuttle’s claims, which Elizabeth Elbourne from far off Montreal described as ‘highly optimistic readings of carefully selected sources, including Robinson’s Friendly Mission’, often fail under scrutiny.
The editors to their great credit give space to four Indigenous voices, Pallawa people, to have a say on *Friendly Mission*. Rodney Dillon, a fighter on many Indigenous issues, condemns Robinson as the source of many contemporary Pallawa troubles. Wendy Aitken, argues that Robinson’s ‘good intentions’ can be a mask for a racial policy and that Plomley’s editing was completed in the context of a ‘whitewashed history’ and its interpretation should be acknowledged as such. Sharon Dennis anticipates she is facing a highly controversial document and is caught between respect for research and the views of her fellow Pallawa. She suggests the new edition of *Friendly Mission* should have carried a warning that Pallawa people disagree with elements of it, and that it is a representation of the past not the truth. Dennis will bide her time before reading such a confronting book. Ian Anderson presents a powerful consideration of a book that threatened his very selfhood in the 1980s, but which he has come to value in many ways. Anderson rejects Plomley’s framework of hybridity to describe Pallawa, which he argues convincingly is still implicitly based on racial categories. Instead Anderson argues for an identity, for himself at least, based on place and family – and in that sense reveals a generic human response to identity – for none of us are pure anything and all of us are rooted to place and kin.

Two authors tell us something of Robinson the author of *Friendly Mission*. Cassandra Pybus refers to the rivalry between Gilbert Robertson, a magistrate, whose two black Tasmanians Robinson commandeered for his Bruny Island mission. In 1835 controversy arose as to who first formed the idea of the conciliation. Pybus is not an admirer of Robinson which shows in her partial language tinged with hindsight. Robinson was not aware until the end at Flinders Island (the subject of Plomley’s *Weep in Silence*) that he might be presiding over a catastrophe and like most of us daily tried to comprehend unfolding events and pathways in the contemporary world in which each day brings surprises. Henry Reynolds is much more the careful historian arguing that Robinson was led by curiosity, humanity, Christianity and a belief in the equality of Tasmanians who were brothers of one blood with him. Robinson also saw them as original owners who were owed rights. Only as his career progressed did the ambitious and status-seeking side of the civil servant of empire outweigh his Christian humanitarianism.

What does this companion lack – more on Robinson perhaps? While the editors give a vignette of Plomley and his intellectual traditions, little is presented on Robinson the man, save for passing comment by Pybus and Reynolds. However, a biographical piece would have been invidious to write and would have proved partial to one side only. Perhaps a chronology of his life might have sufficed – but even such a list might be interpretative. In that sense Nicholas Thomas who has the last word appeals rightly for the ambiguities and complexities within Robinson to emerge in any reading of his work. There are many Robinsons to be explored by emerging scholars and all who would search, which makes this publication welcome and timely.

Richard Broome
La Trobe University
This is a beautiful book. Wakefield Press’ overall design, high quality paper, appealing lay-out, plus the numerous, well-reproduced and integrated illustrations and attractive cover, make for an experience that is aesthetic as well as intellectual. This befits the topic: a study of artefacts and encounters on a variety of Australian frontiers.

Philip Jones selects a range of intriguing objects and then elaborates on their stories, explaining along the way why they mystified and intrigued their collectors, earlier scholars and this author. Some items from the inventory include: Master Blackburn’s whip, broken shields, metal, fire drilling equipment, toas, the magic garb of Daisy Bates, Namatjira’s Jesus Plaque and a large block of Ochre.

Philip Jones is an historian interested in cross-cultural objects and aesthetics. He has spent many years working at the South Australian Museum, studying and building up its collections. This is fairly unusual, as over the last half-century, historians in Australia have been primarily concerned with texts. They use archival records, newspapers and secondary literature. Only a couple of decades ago, they started harnessing oral history, and some became interested in the visual, the performative, heritage and popular memory. Some attempted to draw on many different kinds of evidence. A few investigated artefacts. But generally this has been the sphere of the anthropologist and the archaeologist.

For historians employed at a museum, however, this mind-set must change. It is their job. In the academy, using and critiquing objects as data is not even part of training for historians. In order to be trained to deal with such sources, they will need to study ‘art history and curatorship’ or some additional ‘thing-oriented’ course elsewhere.

I am not exaggerating about the inbuilt ‘hard evidence’ conservatism of the history profession. Only a year or so ago, one prominent American-based journal rejected at least one article that drew upon material culture, on the grounds that they only published articles based upon ‘textual evidence’. Unfortunately I fear that is the kind of journal whose conservatism gains an ‘A’ rating in quality audits.

Ochre and Rust amply illustrates the different kinds of histories that can be told when the author uses objects as starting points. Jones’ cross-cultural explanations are often enabled by careful readings of linguistic accounts (in particular the wealth of evidence created by Luise Hercus) as well as rich museological documentation in text and other forms.

The book’s final chapter ‘That special property’ takes us on a journey in search of ochre. Jones tells us about a lengthy sacred pilgrimage; we discover the shine and glimmer of special quality ochre, how it stood for blood – sacred blood. Smeared over bodies for ceremonial reasons, or bones in funerary rites, it denoted vast epic stories. Jones connects this phenomenon with people all over
the world. The Australian coming of shepherds and police on the pilgrimage route changed everything: it caused anxious, conflictual encounters with colonisers; it blocked the highway. Alternative supplies were substituted, but they were not as good, and lacked much of their inherent meaning as they were not from the right place; no-one was satisfied or happy with the compromise. Colonisers tried to exploit the resource, and then Indigenous custodians started doing the same thing. Ochre-driven ceremonies ceased. A substance, an essence, thus becomes poignantly imbricated in long traditions, in rapid disruptions, in failed solutions, and in a little-known story brought together. Such stories are retrieved like undiscovered artefacts of frontier.

Rust is equally evocative. Metal spear blades; metal axe heads hafted onto traditional tools and weapons. These objects become imbricated in negotiation and exchange in that liminal space of frontier. They transmogrified with new uses, new meanings. Indigenous makers adopted not only newly introduced materials but also new manufacturing techniques. The same object has a new meaning in its transformed context. What secret meanings, for example, might still be contained in Albert Namatjira’s Jesus Plaques?

This book contains some finely realised prose and elegantly told stories that can take on a lively rhythm. While this generally makes for a satisfying read, a few things niggled. Sometimes the author’s intellectual curiosity flows outwards to communicate fluently to the general reader; sometimes it becomes a side-tracked insider-academic voice too concerned with splitting hairs. At other times the reflections on things become somewhat perambulating, repetitive and even vague; a harsher editorial pen would have ensured a more riveting read.

I wondered why the term ‘race’ was barely used and why the term ‘frontier’ was not rigorously interrogated or qualified. Was the largely unproblematised use of such terms a valiant attempt to avoid the hard-edged, often meaningless boundaries postulated in the dichotomous ‘sides’ of the History Wars? Jones does make judgements – for example he is somewhat scathing of Daisy Bates at the same time as being more sympathetic than most authors.

Jones is less driven by the hope of political outcomes than by open-minded curiosity and a desire to solve mysteries. Perhaps it is good that Jones does not define a frontier with clear boundaries. As he promises, this book is about the lives of frontier objects and the lives of those who carried them. In its diverse, myriad journeys, Ochre and Rust deploys objects to redefine frontier. A vivid human-to-human trade in things both shapes and frames colonising relationships, with very specific, although not always legible, meanings. Synthetic objects denote Indigenous modernities. Ochre and Rust presents a ‘new’ frontier, populated not only by words, politics and human faces, but by haphazard relics, by painted and clad bodies and by curious hybrid artefacts signifying human ingenuity, adaptation and boundary-crossing relationships. Via these carefully investigated, meaningful objects, new paradigms for frontier start to come into shape. Frontier journeys take some different routes, thus refreshing and reinvigorating the history of frontier.

Ann McGrath
Australian National University

The time of Basedow’s expeditions was indeed a different time: those Aboriginal people who could still recall Herbert Basedow have now all passed away. The last living link in South Australia to the medical expeditions was the Arabana elder Laurie Stuart, born 1911, deceased 2005. He was listed as no. 46 on Basedow’s third expedition. He was a young boy living near Anna Creek siding when Basedow came there after the influenza epidemic, the yarirda ‘evil curse’, that killed so many people who lived by the Ghan railway line. Laurie Stuart had a distant recollection of ‘those people who came through with a buggy’, but he had subsequently heard more about Basedow from his elders. He associated Basedow mainly with Punch Arrerika, an Arrernte man who was Basedow’s cameleer on several expeditions. Punch – so named by Basedow – spent his later years at Curdimurka among Arabana people. ‘Nanna Laurie’ wanted to show us Punch Arrerika’s camp when we went through Curdimurka in 1995. He had no trouble at all finding his way through the large spread of debris on the historic campsite by the old Curdimurka siding. He led us straight to the spot where Punch had been living: Punch features on several photos in A Different Time, including a portrait on p. 128.

Seeing that with the death of Laurie Stuart the oral history of Basedow has lost its last link, it is particularly gratifying that this excellent and beautiful book has now appeared, letting us see Basedow and many of his photographs in historical perspective.

The chapter ‘Basedow, the photographer’ makes the reader aware of the enormous changes that have taken place in the practicalities of photography over the last 100 years. It is hard to imagine these days the difficulties of using glass plate negative cameras when transport was by camel. These difficulties made the taking of photographs a more formal act, and Basedow tended to make at least some of his photographs distinctly artistic, posed and traditional: David Kaus shows this in the brilliant juxtaposition of two photographs of a humpy near Arltunga (p. 36). The first photo is by Basedow and shows a dark, empty humpy with a traditional-looking old man sitting by the entrance: the whole image is set out as if it were before white contact. This is a striking photo and was in fact one used in the publicity for the exhibition. The second photo is by Basedow’s assistant Frank Feast. There is no old man by the entrance of the humpy, but various belongings are piled up inside, five men in early twentieth century garb are standing about outside, there is a dog in the distance, and – a raw amateur’s mistake – the shadow of the photographer is visible in the foreground: there is nothing memorable about this ordinary-looking image.

Many of Basedow’s photos are beautiful without posing, and are of sheer natural beauty, such as the scenes from the Elsey and Wilton Rivers, from Uluru
and Crown Point, and from the Petermann Ranges. There are many remarkable portraits, mostly of Aboriginal people, but also photos of various dignitaries, and a fine picture of Pastor Carl Strehlow, standing in the church doorway at Hermannsburg, clasping what is no doubt a bible or prayer-book. There are wonderful action photos of travel with camels. Some of these show the underlying kindness and concern for humans and animals that characterised Basedow: pulling a cow from a bog, removing a splinter from the toes of a camel, Arrerika watering the camels, and even Spotty, Basedow’s dog, wearing little leather shoes specially made to protect his paws.

The achievements of Basedow were not well known to the general public before the 2008 exhibition at the National Museum of Australia and the subsequent publication of the present book. His two books on Aboriginal culture are not inspiring and have not attracted much attention. The reports of the medical expeditions remain unpublished, though with their lists of names of Aboriginal people they give remarkable insight into who was where in 1919–1920 in the north of South Australia and adjacent areas of Queensland and the Northern Territory. Anthropologists working on land-claims have trawled through these lists over recent years, but Basedow’s work as a whole has not been widely appreciated.

David Kaus has made up for this: the present book has very fine chapters on ‘Basedow as a man’, and ‘Basedow as a scientist’ and gives insight and remarkable documentation for all the expeditions. Having spent many years on the study of Basedow and his collections, he is able to give us a brilliant account and assessment, so we can see Basedow as a humane and dedicated person, concerned about the welfare of Aboriginal people.

David Kaus writes of Basedow’s photographical collection as follows:

This valuable archive of places, people and times is one of Herbert Basedow’s enduring legacies: a window on a different time. (p. 41)

It is a most beautiful book, well written and well produced, and the author and the National Museum of Australia Press deserve our highest praise. It is a book that will be appreciated for many years to come.

Luise Hercus
Australian National University

Until ten years ago, the title and the cover-picture of this book would have captured most associations with ‘Afghans’ in the Australian popular imagination. Two bearded men in long robes and turbans, one sitting on an ornately ornamented camel and the other standing by a laden camel. Religion, travel, transport, camels, different ways of living. All these were featured in the stories, artefacts, photographs and documents in the South Australian Museum travelling exhibition curated by Philip Jones and Anna Kenny, from which this book derives. But the book is much more than a catalogue of exhibits.

Philip Jones begins with a vivid word-picture of some of the last elderly Muslim cameleers sitting in the courtyard of the Adelaide Mosque in the early 1950s. This is followed by glimpses of the histories of artefacts collected for the exhibition, carefully preserved by descendants and by a few pastoralists and others who recognised their importance. Setting the background for the exhibition, he observes the absence of collections of material relating to the cameleers in Australian museums.

There are clues to the reasons for the absence both here and in the second essay by Anna Kenny. The ‘Afghans’ (Kenny gives a good discussion of the use of this term) came as individuals or in small groups from a variety of places in what are now Pakistan, India and Afghanistan. They were on short contracts to work as long-distance transporters. After 1901, the White Australia policy made it almost impossible for them to bring wives. This made it hard for them to establish settlements, although they did build mosques in a few towns. While some started families with Aboriginal women, and a handful were formally married to Australians (Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal), the majority returned home at the end of their contracts. Once the railways came, and put the cameleers out of business, there was no pressure for sponsoring Muslim migrants. So, the small communities around the mosques in places like Perth, Adelaide and Marree gradually dwindled. Their families merged into Aboriginal communities or into the wider Australian society.

The introductory essays are followed by eight chapters consisting of a succinct text linking a wonderful collection of beautifully reproduced illustrations and associated descriptions. The artefacts, maps, documents, and contemporary drawings and photographs not only bring the text to life, but also draw the reader’s attention to many other aspects of the lives of Muslim cameleers – from the blue glass fragments of chlorodyne bottles showing what took the place of alcohol, to the invoice charging for water for camels.

The chapters trace the history of the cameleers, starting with their homelands, then their sponsorship to Australia, their work in major expeditions from the late nineteenth century to the Madigan expedition (and including a biographical
sketch of Saleh Mahomed, one of the best-known cameleer explorers). There is a detailed description of aspects of the camel transport trade, from the equipment and harness to photos of strings of camels laden with anything from ore to firewood for burners, to railway sleepers, to bagged chaff to station stores. There is also a discussion of other trades embarked on by Muslim immigrants from hawking to herbalism (including some information on the well-known Mahomet Allum).

These are followed by a chapter on the relations between the Muslim immigrants and Aborigines. Aborigines learned camel-handling skills from the Muslims, represented them and their camels in wood, on boomerangs, rock art and drawings, and made use of camel hair for waist belts. There is a chapter on daily life in camel camps and Muslim enclaves in towns with some revealing and touching photos of the families and young children, a pair of children’s slippers. This is followed by a discussion of their relations with Australians generally – the kinds of official paperwork they had to deal with, the sources of conflict, from competition with the bullockies to competition over water (perceptions of difference, conflicts over livelihood, water, racism), to the decline of the camel transport which led to some cameleers letting their camels go free, thus creating the feral camel problem of today. The last of these chapters is a brief discussion of how the Muslim cameleers have been represented in drawings, paintings and films (and more recently Ghan train paraphernalia), and of how their descendants are helping to keep the stories of the cameleers alive.

A significant contribution of the book is the appendix of brief biographic details on more than 1100 Muslim pioneers. It contains details of where they were born, family connections, where they lived, occupations, dealings with officialdom, and sometimes small portraits from the Commonwealth certificate of ‘exemption from the dictation test’. The men are mostly turbaned, but there are the occasional fez or hat, and a few bare heads. The information comes from many sources, occasionally from their own memoirs, or from lists of contributors to mosque building funds, or from dealings with the bureaucracy (Fakir Mahomet from Karachi who had a Sydney-born Australian wife, Emily Ann, but whose request for naturalisation was rejected), or more tragically from dealings with the law (Dost Mohammad from Baluchistan who was killed by his Australian-Italian wife’s two brothers in a brawl, and whose wife was in turn knifed to death in India as revenge).

One can always quibble about what is not in the book (I would have liked more on how they were engaged overseas, what the contracts were like, how they actually talked and engaged with other Australians, how they learned to write English, who they used as intermediaries in dealing with Australians). But for some of those questions one can turn to the substantial reference list. The main deficiency in the book is the frustrating lack of an index. Other than that, it is a book which is beautiful to look at, thought provoking, has some interesting maps and contains important reference material.

Jane Simpson
University of Sydney

Some time in the late 1980s, Ngaliwurr, a Yolngu woman with great cultural knowledge, worked with me at the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Sound Archive to document her brother’s extensive collection of recordings of clan songs. As a Christian, she agonised about whether she needed to give up important aspects of her traditional culture as she moved deeper into Christianity. This question arose just before Fiona Magowan left for her fieldwork in Arnhem Land, where she became immersed in Yolngu culture and saw how Ngaliwurr’s people were dealing with that same dilemma. Ngaliwurr’s question remains, but this book helps us to understand some of her thinking when she asked it.

Magowan’s 1994 doctoral thesis at Oxford University, ‘Melodies of mourning: a study of form and meaning in Yolngu womens music and dance in traditional and Christian ritual contexts’, provides much of the material for this book. As a student of John Blacking, she has been trained both as a social anthropologist and as an ethnomusicologist. She has published both nationally and internationally on aspects of syncretism, ways of knowing and connections of land and culture amongst Yolngu people. This background, plus her extensive field research and experience in journalism, qualifies her eminently to write a creative book that ties together various strands of Yolngu knowledge of ecology, song and ritual and how these have been applied to their Christian beliefs.

The subtitle, ‘Music and Emotion in Northern Australia’, describes the underlying theme of each of the nine chapters. Both concepts are intimately connected with the land as Yolngu experience the songs and stories evoked by their country and the memories of those people connected with it that have passed away. The first chapter gives a scholarly précis of issues in the anthropology of emotion and of the senses, women’s roles in ritualised sentiment, and how Christianity has formed an important part of Yolngu life. After exploring how cultural changes are affecting the Yolngu, Magowan moves on to a chapter describing the place of music in the education of children. Chapter 4, ‘Performing emotions’ depicts how ritual enacts feelings of grief, anger and joy through song and dance. Chapter 5 describes how closely the senses are interwoven in Yolngu perceptions of ‘touching through the eye’ and ‘visioning with the ear’. Ways that landscape evokes the ancestors are explored in Chapter 6. The last part of the book draws upon the concepts shown in the preceding parts in order to demonstrate how they apply to the Christianity practiced by the Yolngu.

Magowan takes us on her own personal journey as she first arrived in Arnhem Land, sharing her feelings of general bewilderment as she entered into a complex culture where each sound, gesture, and place was interconnected.
Her questions about the culture and her depth of feeling as she grapples with cosmological issues appear throughout the book and provide some welcome pauses amidst the detailed analytical concepts.

Many works on Yolngu culture and song concentrate upon men’s performances; however, this book focuses upon the songs and associated emotional experiences of women, demonstrating how Yolngu children are socialised into the intricacies of the adult world. There are few studies of children’s acquisition of musical skill and knowledge through songs, and this important book fills a gap in that literature. One of the most innovative parts of the book appears in Chapter 7, ‘Crying for Jesus’, where Magowan uses the Western theological concept of *perichoresis*, a Greek term used by theologians to describe the relationship of the three persons of the Trinity in order to explain how Yolngu see the relationship amongst ancestors, persons and the environment (p. 142). She traces some of these connections step-by-step through a story based upon the Yolngu Turtle ancestor. Later on, she introduces us to the Rev Dr Djiniyini Gondarra, a respected clan leader and ordained minister in the Uniting Church, describing some of the ways he has constructed a Yolngu/Christian cosmology that maintains both traditional and Christian elements. The magnificent bibliography guides the reader to most of the major sources in the anthropology of emotion as well as many works on Indigenous music.

Any book dealing with the Yolngu requires the reader to recognise some terminology in Indigenous language/s. Magowan gives us a glossary at the very beginning, which is most welcome as readers will need to use it often. Also the book is dense where she describes existing scholarship in areas of emotive anthropology. It seems that the Yolngu have already sorted out many of these issues within their own society, and this book helps us to understand how sophisticated they really are. This book was shortlisted in 2008 for the Stanner Award, given by the AIATSIS Council to the author of the best published contribution to Australian Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Studies.

On a personal note, my friend Ngaliwurr Munungurr has now passed away. I am thankful to this book for helping me to understand her better.

Grace Koch
Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies
Writing in the 1930s, AP Elkin commented that ‘it is probably now too late to see a burial ceremony in its old and complete form’, but that nonetheless ‘some of the old practices are still carried on, for it is in such a significant social and individual crisis as death that the old faith and customs break through in spite of an apparently genuine acceptance of modern ways’. His tone is marked by the ‘extinctionist’ view of Aboriginal culture prevalent at the time and reflects an equation of culture with ritual practice. More than 70 years later traditional ritual practice has ceased in large parts of Australia, but as this book demonstrates Aboriginal cultural beliefs about death continue and funeral practices, even if seemingly Anglo-Australian, carry very distinct cultural markers. While death is a universal human experience, the manner in which death is experienced continues to represent a significant division between Aboriginal societies and the dominant culture in which they now find themselves embedded.

Like Howard and Frances Morphy, who provide a fitting and succinct afterword to this excellent collection of essays, the book prompted me to reflect on the place of death in my own life. I am now 38 and have attended all of three funerals: those of my great-grandfather, my grandmother and my mother-in-law. All the contributions in this volume point to the regularity with which Aboriginal people across the nation attend funerals. One reason for this is the actual number of deaths, another the size and nature of people’s social networks. When everybody in your social field is kin or kin of kin, every death concerns you. While reading this book I was visiting the north-east Arnhem Land community of Elcho Island (Galiwin’ku) when almost 1000 people came to the airport to see off the body of a young man who had tragically died during the night. Such a spontaneous collective response to an individual death is unimaginable in any mainstream Australian suburb.

The contributions in this volume range widely across the country; they include examples from remote Western Desert and Yolngu communities, Kimberley and Queensland towns, country New South Wales and the Torres Strait. Not surprisingly, the nature of ritual and mortuary celebration varies: all incorporate Christian aspects, but some include many traditional elements (including ritual wailing, dancing, singing, and primary and secondary burials) while others appear on the surface like regular Christian burials. The cross-cultural dynamic of funerals, however, has many parallels across the nation. Significantly, funerals are shown to be a domain of cultural reproduction, the claiming of a uniquely Aboriginal space; one of the few spaces in the Aboriginal life experience where Aboriginal people can take control and direct proceedings. At funerals, Aboriginal people can take pride in practices that defy the expectations of the dominant culture.

Grieving practices are one example. Across many of the chapters the tension between the stoic Christian approach to death is contrasted with the socially sanctioned, even expected, wailing and other public forms of expressing grief among Aboriginal communities; including those who may ascribe to the Christian faith. Grieving is a social process and people are not left to grieve alone nor expected to do so in silence.

At an even more fundamental level, Aboriginal funerals are anti-economical, thereby making them essentially heretical from the perspective of the dominant culture. There is the immediate financial cost, as families and communities may need to cater for large numbers of visiting relatives, while those coming from afar need to pay for fuel, flights and accommodation along the way. Then there is the indirect cost. Those people in employment may need to take extended periods of leave, while those not employed (the majority in remote communities) have that much less time to pursue their employment options. That seems to have been the thinking of then Federal Health Minister Tony Abbott when he urged Aboriginal people to ‘speed up their grieving in order to make themselves “work-ready”’, while visiting the Pitjantjatjara lands in 2006 (cited by Redmond, p. 83).

As the editors point out in their introduction, given the frequency of death in communities one could have expected people to become emotionally numb. Apathy around the seemingly endless cycle of funerals would be understandable, yet the opposite seems to be the case. Substantial social and emotional energy is invested in funerals; again and again. Throughout the book one can see that at least some of that energy arises from the paradoxical situation where the death of an individual serves as a cause for social reproduction; a public confirmation that a particularly constituted kinship network persists and is united. Because of this, there is substantial social pressure on individuals and families to attend funerals, to be seen to be present. Related to this is the risk of being accused of having caused the death, eg by sorcery or ill-wishing. Absence from a funeral may well give rise to such suspicions, a concern frequently reported in the book. Focusing on those aspects, however, all too easily gives rise to a cynical view of Aboriginal mortuary practices. A view in which the individual counts for little and is subject to ‘irrational’ (ie accusations of sorcery) pressures from society. This view, even if unarticulated, seems to underpin the reasoning of some of public commentators who occasionally criticise Aboriginal funeral practice in Aboriginal policy discourse and is frequently encountered in (white) remote Australia. An equally important, and more positive factor, also reported across the chapters, is that these extensive communal mortuary rites play an important role in the healing of those most affected by the death. On the evidence of the mortuary rites, Aboriginal societies have a keen awareness of the interrelationship between the health (including mental) of individuals and social health. By providing social support to the grieving, society itself is maintained in balance. A simplistic appeal to ‘grieve more like us’, as was made by Abbott, may be well-meaning in terms of the economic priorities of our own cultural

11 See also Sandall 2001.
world view, but it fails to engage with the social priorities of Aboriginal culture. Another priority that is often missed because it is so divergent from ours, is the well-being of the spirit of the deceased.

The question of the afterlife is of course closely entwined with that of death. This book documents that Aboriginal people across Australia believe that people continue life in spirit form after the death of the human body. Equally common is the belief that these spirits are frequently dangerous to the living, at least during the first period after the death. This is explored in most detail by Smith who shows how among the Wik speaking people of Cape York, the recently deceased are considered dangerous because they are disturbed by their sudden isolation from their kin. No longer able to properly engage with those who remain alive, they experience grief, trauma and possibly anger, and may try to take this out on the living. They are dangerous until this traumatic period is over. Mortuary rites, as well as the accompanying smoking ceremonies and other cleansing practices, including name avoidance, can therefore be interpreted as directed both at the grief of the next of kin who remain alive, and the grief of the recently deceased.

Smith’s account includes an interesting twist, when some of his informants deliberately do not smoke houses or property so as to keep the spirit of the deceased with them rather then ‘chase ‘em away’ (Smith, p. 196), presumably in cases where the deceased is considered ‘safe’. With time, of course, the recently deceased can become beneficial ancestral spirits who may assist the living in everyday affairs.

This book contains some beautifully written ethnography. Musharbash’s chapter stands out particularly, with its haunting images of Warlpiri sorry camps, but most authors contribute passages of striking ethnographic imagery. Many of the chapters are highly personal, revealing the close relationships between anthropologists and informants and the emotional impact on the former when ‘informants’, who in fact have been friends and teachers, die.

It is the kind of work that can be read again and again from different angles, as it touches on cross-cultural relations and policy issues, psychology, theology and that most fundamental of human questions of what constitutes a good life and a good death. To make this work available to a wider audience hopefully a more affordable paperback edition will be released before too long.

References


Kim McCaul
Attorney-General’s Department
South Australia
What an extraordinary and welcome book! Let me ‘out’ myself at the start: this is a book about Anglican missionaries, and I am an Anglican missionary. For most of my adult life I have worked under the authority of local Indigenous Christian leaders translating the Bible into their language on what had once been an Anglican mission. I have often wondered what Church historians might make of our work in a hundred years time. This book has begun to give me an early answer, and I am grateful to Noel Loos for it.

Loos has not moderated his passion developed over a lifetime of research and friendship with Indigenous people in the Anglican missions in Queensland. The confronting title warns of a passionate narrative that is as much theological and personal as it is historical. Loos’ thesis is that the good news about Christ came to Indigenous people through white people, often in white people’s language, and muddled up with white people’s technology and largesse and especially, white peoples’ power. The black cross is iconic of Indigenous suffering, suggesting that as the waves of invasion, conquest and irresistible pressure for re-acculturation swept over them, it would have been easy for them to see themselves as the one suffering on the cross of these historical experiences. But Loos sets this black and white scene in order to describe something multi coloured in its human outworking, utterly moving and quite miraculous: many Indigenous people did, and still do, accept the news that Christ, who was neither white nor black, suffered for the sins of everyone, both white and black, in showing God’s desire to forgive regardless of any human attribute or achievement. The great question Loos addresses is,

How is it that Indigenous people who experienced displacement and humiliation at the hands of the outside white world, can see past their personal histories, and past our clumsy and motivationally muddled missionary work to the every-coloured Christ who is Lord and Judge of all cultures and colours, and who offers salvation to all cultures? How has it happened that out of badly run ‘missions’ there has arisen an increasingly independent Indigenous-led Church with its own theologians and evangelists, confident enough in themselves to demand and receive a place in the highest counsels of the Church.

Loos has not written a theoretical answer to these questions, nor has he tried (he may attempt this later) to provide a broader history of this process across Australia. He has instead provided a fine-grained snapshot describing what happens to real Indigenous people in contact with flesh and blood missionaries in Queensland, and in the context of the work of one real life Anglican mission agency over the last century and a half. The power of his book is in this focus on the ‘people on the ground’: Loos shows us the missionaries warts and all, celebrating the astonishing way God uses ordinary people in cross cultural but
genuinely personal relationships. Loos has tried with some success to give credit where it is due to those missionaries who were, more often than not, painfully aware of their often unavoidable role as the velvet glove on the iron fist of the outside world. Loos has a parenthetical chapter on the Forrest River massacre and proposes the missionary Ernest Gribble as a sort of gritty and uncomely hero, who sparked a royal commission by his courageous advocacy, and who Loos suggests indirectly set off Australia’s recent ‘history wars’. Gribble is well documented, so often carries Loos’ narrative of work in the Queensland missions. Through Gribble Loos tells the story of lots of other people, missionary and Indigenous, who lived through it all. He also reveal the pain and slow-motion battles of constant, mundane negotiations with an outside world, usually about the resources to care for people about whom that outside world was ignorant and dismissive. Even the missionary agencies were then, as are governments now who replaced them in running the communities, more inclined to rhetoric and self congratulation than to the risks and costs of genuine empowerment and the emergence of unmoderated Indigenous voices. But they have emerged despite all.

Loos has reported the abuses, the policy failures and the complicated way mission organisations represent their denominations, which in turn reflect the mainstream Australian society. The vision and compassion of the few is always dependent on the funding of the many, and both must operate within the irresistible parameters of a rapidly de-Christianising nation.

In fact, for the vast majority of Australians, even those in the churches, the very existence of an Indigenous church, or of missionary work for that matter, are unknown, shocking, laughable or completely inconceivable. The fact that Indigenous church leaders are ministering and teaching independently, courageous and without resources is simultaneously a shock and rebuke to us. The fact that there are now Indigenous bishops and clergy, and that the Australian Anglican church is at least trying to keep up with God’s work outside the cathedral, is a great encouragement. I hope through this book Loos can help some Australians visualise the reality of Aboriginal Christian lives and leadership, not focusing on the horrors but on the victories.

Loos, has concentrated on Queensland, and so does not deal with Aboriginal Churches worshipping and teaching in their own languages, which is the norm in the Anglican communities in the Northern Territory. Bible translators are continually moved by the way Indigenous people uncovered in words of their own language, a message that predates and outranks all the powerful white world does or offers, and a message about the infinite value of each person before God regardless of culture, technology or political power. We have seen Indigenous Christians confront simultaneously the injustice and manipulation of white officials and power hungry people from their own society. The frequent testimony of Aboriginal men is that in Christ, they are empowered to rebuild their lives from the suicidal despair of long term unemployment and transgenerational low self esteem that lead automatically to drug abuse and lateral violence in all its horrible forms.
This is a book that should be welcomed into what must certainly be a continuing discussion, as the Indigenous churches face continuing, inevitable change and growth, swept along and trying always to make Christ known to their own rapidly changing linguistic and social contexts, and as the nation also changes unpredictably the forms in which our demands are placed upon Indigenous people. Other books may be provoked by this one to tell a similarly detailed story of the other frontiers, where the same Christ met the same needs despite all of us, politicians, voters, Church people, media, academics and missionaries.

Rev S Etherington
Darwin
Despite its privileged position as the established church of the colonising power in the Australian colonies, the Church of England tends to be eclipsed in the story of nineteenth century evangelisation by the efforts of English Dissenters, Wesleyan Methodists, Roman Catholics, Scottish Presbyterians, Moravians and Lutherans. This is partly due to the amorphous and disconnected nature of early Anglican missionary activity. Apart from the English Church Missionary Society, which failed to sustain its missions, there was little organisation except perhaps for diocesan committees. For instance, the Church of England Mission to Aborigines of the Diocese of Melbourne fostered missions at Yelta (1855), Lake Tyers (1861), Lake Condah (1867) and Framlingham (1867).

Also of some importance was the supervisory role of the Anglican hierarchy. Chaplain Marsden, despite his negative attitude, actively promoted the work of three societies. LE Threlkeld’s mission at Lake Macquarie, after his break with the London Missionary Society, came directly under the nominal oversight of the Church authorities. Bishop Broughton was particularly sympathetic. The Church of England also came to the support of the Reverend John Brown Gribble when his own Congregational denomination was unable to support him thus leading indirectly to the important Anglican missions at Yarrabah and Forrest River staffed by the Gribble family. The Anglicans also supported the work of the Moravian missionaries. In Melbourne, Bishop Charles Perry and the Reverend Lloyd Chase were promoters of the Moravian Mission at Ebenezer in the Wimmera which produced the celebrated Aboriginal convert Nathaniel Pepper.

Largely unsung were other individual Anglican Church leaders and laymen who assumed a caring role for the Aboriginal people. Chaplain Middleton at Newcastle was concerned for their welfare, as was the Reverend CPN Wilton. In 1842 the Reverend George King opened a ‘native school’ at Fremantle. In South Australia Archdeacon MB Hale started a ‘native school’ at Poonindie in 1850. Another in this group of early Anglican philanthropists was Archdeacon John Ramsden Wollaston (1791–1856) in Western Australia.
Wollaston’s diaries covering the period 1841–1856 were first edited by Canon A Burton and the Reverend Percy U Henn in two volumes, *Wollaston’s Picton Journal 1841–1844* and *Wollaston’s Albany Journals 1848–1856*.\(^{12}\) The dust jackets to each volume carried the sub-title ‘The Personal Diary of an observant, educated Early Settler in Western Australia’.

A new scholarly edition of *The Wollaston Journals* under the general editorship of Geoffrey Bolton was published by the University of Western Australia Press. The first two volumes appeared in 1991 and 1992. Volume three (1845–1856), edited by Wollaston’s descendant Helen Walker Mann containing journals and correspondence, finally appeared in 2006.

Wollaston is mainly remembered, if at all, for his attempts to establish ‘native schools’, but he was frustrated by official attitudes. On 5 June 1848 he wrote in his Albany Journal:

> I need not repeat the insuperable difficulties in my position, wh have prevented even an attempt to educate any of their children: but my opinion as to what might be done, were means at hand, remain entirely unchanged. – I have always been upon the best terms with the several tribes, & never met one of these degraded fellow beings without receiving a nod, a smile or a ‘good morning’. – There have been of late *two or three* instances of very cruel treatment of some of them by whites; for wh the latter are most justly visited with punishment (chiefly imprisonment at Fremantle & hard labour) *when they are found out*. – But the grants of Government are chiefly beneficial to the Protectors, & their Subordinates, & are of little service to the natives generally or in the protection of the property of the Settlers. (*Wollaston Journals* vol 3, pp. 70–71)

Wollaston may have called his Aboriginal friends degraded, which related to their conditions and social position, but his views about their potential and capacity for learning were enlightened and far removed from those of some philanthropists who believed in a ‘racial hierarchy’ in which the Aboriginal was placed much lower than the European.

Wollaston should be remembered for his positive approach:

> I want first to have the numerous Children of the Whites in proper training; & next (or, after a time, simultaneously) the Children of the Aborigines. – My formerly expressed opinion of the capacity of the latter remains the same. They wd do credit to any school, if taken due pains with. – As I can barely manage to maintain my own family, my hands are tied at present. (p. 95)

When he inspected the ‘native school’ at King George Sound in 1848 he reported that ‘the native Australians have been very untruly underrated. In intelligence, good temper & faithfulness to their engagements they are

\(^{12}\) Burton and Henn 1948, 1954.
remarkable’ (p. 132). And his opinion in April 1851, after catechising the children in a Fremantle Sunday School – ‘white and native’, had not changed. He thought ‘the natives’ far the best (p. 220).

Although Wollaston hoped that Christianisation would solve the problems arising from colonial occupation he was only too well aware of the unfortunate immediate consequences of frontier contact. He wrote in May 1853:

I sadly fear very many of these natives have been shot, not merely in self defence, but wantonly & lawlessly. – In these parts the ‘Warrang’ greatly abounds wh is a kind of yam, & when roasted sweet, pleasant, & nourishing food – this grows where the best feed for stock is found. Hence the usurpation of the Ground & the secret destruction of the poor Aborigines. Is it to be wondered then that they should retaliate upon the flocks & herds! – The abundance of the Warrang & the paucity of animals, may account for the greater concentration of these tribes. Such doings are very shocking, perpetuated under the mask of civilization & Xianity but alas! the well known consequence of Colonization among savages in all parts of the Globe. (p. 311, see also p. 345)

Perhaps the most moving references in the Journals are Wollaston’s intimate pen portraits of individual Aborigines, mostly converts: young Pead, the 12-year-old ‘apprentice’ to a carpenter who was ‘almost equal to a man in the sawpit’ (pp. 44–45), ‘Captain’, who wore an old military uniform and made ‘a point of going to Church in full costume’ (p. 96), Waylie (properly Wylie) who accompanied Eyre on his expedition from South Australia to Albany in 1841, a man of ‘mild & pleasing countenance of great intelligence’ to whom Eyre had just sent a double barrelled gun (pp. 96–97, 132), Lindal, employed as a whaler (p. 132), the ‘half cast’ boy Frederick Christian (p. 170) and Eliza Wobart who married a carpenter from a whaler and ‘since her marriage has taught her husband to read’ (p. 133).

By the end of the nineteenth century Anglican mission work appeared more consolidated. The Australian Board of Missions, founded in 1850 as a largely episcopal body co-ordinating Anglican mission work in the Asia-Pacific region, supported its own missions within Australia from the 1880s. Separate from this was the low church and Evangelical Church Missionary Society tradition kept alive by auxiliaries. At the end of the century there were several separate church societies working independently, the Church Missionary Society of Victoria (within the Diocese of Melbourne), the Church Missionary Association of Victoria (CMA) established in 1892, and a similar body in New South Wales which amalgamated with the Victorian CMA in 1916 as the Church Missionary Society of Australia and Tasmania (CMS).

It was the CMA and then the CMS which established missions in Northern Australia. These missions came under public scrutiny in 1932–33 when tribal Aborigines who had killed eight non-Aboriginal men were persuaded by missionaries to come in and explain their conduct only to be subjected to an unsympathetic and punitive administration. There was a backlash against the
Anglican missionaries who expected a more understanding outcome and the trial was a landmark in awakening Australian consciousness to Aboriginal rights. The federal government appointed a trained anthropologist to itinerate in Northern Australia to mediate between the administration and the people acting under tribal law.

Against this background Reverend Canon JW Needham, head of the Australian Board of Missions, published *White and Black in Australia* (SPCK, London, 1935) for the interdenominational National Missionary Council of Australia, ostensibly the first attempt at a comprehensive history of missions within Australia. Until John Harris published *One Blood*... (Albatross Books, Sutherland, 1990) the missionary story was largely told in individual mission histories.

In Northern Australia the Anglicans have been well served by the writings of the Reverend Keith Cole and the EK Cole Publishing Fund. *Refuge on the Roper: The Origins of Roper River Mission Ngukurr* by Murray Seiffert is in this tradition. Like Needham’s *White and Black in Australia* it is a work of missionary apologetics inspired by current critical views of the churches for assisting the implementation of the government’s former White Australia policy. Seiffert invokes the work of John Harris and Henry Reynolds to present a positive missionary image.

The book contains eight chapters. The first chapter describes the Roper River region and the interest in it shown by the newly formed CMA. Chapter 2 – ‘The aborigines regard the land as theirs’ – explores the history of the region in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, especially the conflicts that took place on the telegraph, cattle and mining frontiers. As well as using written sources Seiffert draws on Aboriginal oral sources. As the author reports ‘It does not make for comfortable reading, and neither it should’ (p. 2).

Chapter 3 – ‘A cry goes out!’ tells how news of the maltreatment of Aborigines was passed to members of the Anglican Church in Victoria. Even though the majority of Australians at that time expected the Aboriginal people to die out or merge with the white population, the churches felt impelled to combat the injustices and some leaders such as Bishop Gilbert White of Carpentaria and the Reverend AR Ebbs, secretary of CMA in Victoria, did not believe that the Aboriginal people would disappear if protected from invading interests and tribal fighting.

White, like Wollaston in the 1840s, believed in ‘equal capacity’ at a time when most anthropologists still regarded the Australian Aborigines as a ‘child race’, a view that persisted until the Porteus intelligence tests were discredited in the second half of the twentieth century. The Roper River mission was founded to relieve and better ‘the conditions of the Aborigines of Northern Australia’, not merely to proselytise.

Chapter 4 – ‘Explaining the new mission’, is largely about Ebbs’ attempts to arouse interest and support while Chapter Five – ‘Preparing the new mission’,
discusses the role of Bishop White and Ebbs, particularly their trip across the Gulf of Carpentaria looking for a suitable site. Chapter 6 discusses the motivation behind the mission and emphasises the role of protection.

Chapter 7 attempts to place the northern Australia venture of the CMA (CMS) in the older Evangelical tradition of the ‘parent’ CMS in England with its strong anti-slavery connections. The CMA was ‘establishing a sanctuary’ – a ‘Refuge on the Roper’. Chapter 8 tells something of the beginnings of the new mission established in 1908 through the lives of some of its missionaries and early converts, particularly the Aboriginal missionaries, James and Angelina Noble and Horace Reid.

The first baptisms occurred at the Roper mission in May 1913 and Seiffert tells the story of some of the Aboriginal Christians, not necessarily all converts in the traditional Evangelical sense but certainly influenced by the mission teaching (see p. 131). For about 40 years the chaplain at Ngukurr has been the Reverend Canon Michael Gumbuli Wurramara.

That high church bishops could work amicably with low church missionaries and even Dissenters had been proven in the nineteenth century and this was certainly the case at Ngukurr. According to Seiffert (p. 127), the only comment made by Bishop Gilbert White ‘that has a hint that the bishop and the missionaries came from different traditions within the Anglican Church’, was his remark that ‘What is wanted is a Christian community, rather than self-conscious individualistic religionists’. No doubt when the largely non-conformist London Missionary Society handed over its work in Torres Strait to the Diocese of Carpentaria they expected the work to be carried on by the CMS under a similar arrangement rather than by ritualists.

Refuge on the Roper ends with a discussion of Aboriginality and points out that the Indigenous issues in the Northern Territory today can be seen in the ‘challenges facing the missionaries a century ago, issues of economy, sexuality, tradition, legal systems, and so on’ (p. 139).

What is the place of Christianity in Aboriginality? When I reviewed Phillip Pepper’s You Are What You Make Yourself To Be in the 1980s I accepted his Christian stance as a genuine expression of modern Aboriginality – of what it was to be an Aboriginal, a view supported by Diane Barwick when another colleague portrayed Phillip Pepper as a pathetic Uncle Tom character. Since the publication of Robert Kenny’s prizewinning study of Phillip’s grandfather, The Lamb Enters the Dreaming: Nathanael Pepper & the Ruptured World (see review this volume) no one should doubt the genuineness of Nathanael’s conversion and its rootedness in Aboriginality. The Lamb Enters the Dreaming is a new Australian classic and deserves to be on every school curriculum.

13 Pepper 1980.
While Nathaniel (as the family spell his name) was perhaps the first acclaimed baptised Aboriginal convert it is doubtful if he was the first convert. Missionary narratives from around Australia reveal an extraordinary level of caution and fear of ‘backs sliding’ in the early years of contact. But many Aboriginal people responded to Christianity and identified it with their Aboriginality.

In Victoria there was much to challenge the new Aboriginal spirituality, particularly reaction to the legislation (1886, 1890, 1910, 1915) enforcing the separation of ‘half caste’ and ‘full blood’ Aboriginal families. The unfeeling self-seeking intervention of officials and the do-gooders (aka ‘Bible bashers’) of Drouin, determined to place families singly in white neighbourhoods, is told in Jackson’s Track: Memoir of a Dreamtime Place by Carolyn Landon and Daryl Tonkin.15

The second and third generation of Nathaniel Pepper’s family were regarded as ‘half caste’ and could not live with their parents on the mission station at Lake Tyers. Footprints: The Journey of Lucy and Percy Pepper tells the harrowing story of Phillip Pepper’s parents from official archival sources as they tried to make a living for themselves. Lucy was consumptive and in the end could not return home to die.

Percy was a strong worker but found it difficult to support his family and his employers took advantage of him. He enlisted in the First World War and served in France and Belgium. Though he qualified for a Soldier Settler’s block at Koo Wee Rup he found it difficult to meet payments owing to his family’s health problems and the seasonal floods. Although he stayed on longer than most of the returnees he received no assistance and the farm had to be sold. He never succeeded in getting another block in a drier climate.

Many of those ‘evicted’ from Jackson’s Track took to drink but Constable Simpson’s allegation in 1924 that Pepper was ‘a selfish drunken fool’ would have indicated a great low in his life since Lucy had just died and his family were no longer with him. He was afterwards a member of Pastor Doug Nicholls’ congregation in Fitzroy (p. 105).

The official records reveal the mean spiritedness of some of the officials dealing with Aboriginal affairs. CL Greene, acting manager at Lake Tyers from 1915 to 1917 was called to account for ‘destroying an official letter’, a letter from Lucy which he had just consigned to the rubbish bin and he informed his superior (30 September 1915) that Pepper ‘being related to some of the blacks on this station might cause a lot of trouble if allowed on the station’ and he refused to support his application (p. 45). His superior thought the manager’s view was a ‘wrong one’ but negative views were common. The arguments that the Peppers and related families were ‘almost white’ and should not be entitled to Aboriginal assistance on grounds of colour read like the rantings of an apartheid regime (see pp. 82–85).

15 Landon and Tonkin 1999.
Footprints is beautifully produced. As a family history it is a moving record of life between the wars and a family’s struggle to make good. The proliferation of Aboriginal life histories is a new development. My favourite is one which tells a Tom Sawyer-like story of growing up on the former Framlingham Mission in Victoria. Apart from a brief and somewhat obligatory invocation to the wrongs of the past it is a light-hearted celebration of life.

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16 Lowe 2007[2002].

The Lamb Enters the Dreaming: Nathanael Pepper and the Ruptured World is an exhilarating historical inquiry into engagements between Aborigines and newcomers in Australia, and more specifically their different spiritual worlds. In this book Robert Kenny unravels the complex explanations of human difference in 1860 in the Wimmera, western Victoria.

Kenny traces the life of Nathanael Pepper, a Wotjobaluk man who was born in the Wimmera at the moment when the region was inundated with sheep; soon after Moravian missionaries arrived to establish Ebenezer Mission, at a time when missionary endeavour throughout Australia’s colonies was considered a sad failure. However, as Kenny shows, Ebenezer ‘was to surprise the sceptics’ and some of the Wotjobaluk. The surprise came in the form of the mission’s first Aboriginal convert, Pepper, who chose for himself the baptismal name Nathanael. Pepper’s conversion, which roused wide interest in religious and secular circles in Australia and London, was considered a ‘major breakthrough’ in missionary efforts. Kenny’s interest in this moment, rather than announcing it as the ‘beginning of Aboriginal Christianity’, reassesses Christianity’s role in ‘social movements’ and, in particular, what it meant to Pepper. In a colony in which the majority of newcomers believed the Australian race was a doomed one, Pepper, Kenny argues, offered evangelicals, and his own people, a glimmer of hope.

The beauty and benefit for Kenny’s readers is to be taken into the microscopic layers of Pepper’s experience – a rare occurrence in Australian history. There is so much to gain in reading history at such an honest pace: we meet Pepper, the missionaries who he became close to and characters such as Horatio Ellerman who experienced his own conversions (from heathenism to Christianity and from a murderer to a redeemed humanitarian). But we are also taken on an intimate tour, taken almost inside a colonial relationship – to grasp the push and pull of what the Moravian’s (or Christianity) were offering to the Wotjobaluk as their world was rupturing. Kenny forces us to look patiently before we jump into short and fast conclusions, knocking off some old caricatures on the way.

Kenny was intrigued by Pepper’s choosing his own baptismal name, Nathanael, and drawn to explore this story. As Kenny explains:

There is only one Nathanael in Scripture, and only one substantial incident concerning him. In exegetic tradition this incident revolves around what is known as ‘Nathanael’s Question’. In the first chapter of the Gospel of John, Philip tells his friend Nathanael is from Can, whose townspeople had contempt for those of Nazareth – one might even say that ethnic tension existed between the two places – and thus Nathanael asks his question in response to Philip’s news: ‘Can anything good come
out of Nazareth?’, to which Philip replies, ‘Come and See’. That Pepper’s brother, Charley Charley, would later take the baptismal name [Philip] seemed to indicate a clear reference to the Scripture by the brothers.

Kenny pondered (and we, reading along with him wonder) what the conversion of Nathanael Pepper would have looked like: ‘its immediate politics, its antecedents, its aftermath – if we decided that Pepper’s choice of name was meant as a paraphrase: “Can anything good come out of the settler’s Europe?”’ Kenny’s inquiry starts from this point.

As other historians have noted, and Kenny himself reminds us, colonial encounters were fraught with misunderstandings. However, as this book clearly shows, it is often historians who construct the misunderstandings of such slippery moments, rather than allowing for at least some unambiguity, some clear understanding. Kenny persuasively details Pepper’s conversion as one in which he was aware of what such an activity meant; he was a willing participant, not coerced into the conversion by the Moravians and, Kenny argues, a true believer.

Central to Kenny’s interest is what the introduction of sheep and cattle did to Wotjobaluk lore. This question becomes central to understanding how Pepper and the Wotjobaluk received the intruders and their spirituality. The lamb – totem of Jesus Christ – becomes, in the Wotjobaluk world of the Dreaming, totem of the Europeans. Whereas the connection of the religious symbolism of the Lamb and ‘the white things wandering about the paddock’ was, argues Kenny ‘lost to the settlers’, it was not to the Wotjobaluk who witnessed the importance of sheep to the settlers – they even had shepherds to protect these sacred animals. This revelation is at the heart of the book and, in my opinion, is the most important historical revision that Kenny makes. It allows us to go beyond the stale tale of violence between Europeans and Aborigines over the spearing of sheep as being a focused attack on the ‘settler’s economy’, or that such attacks were food related. To perceive the sheep as European totem, such attacks can be understood, at least in the Wimmera, as motivated by ritual on the totem of the European, giving much wanted complexity to an old narrative. As Kenny states: ‘It was not so much the European human that disrupted the world view of the local people of the Wimmera and elsewhere, but the animals they brought with them’.

This is a rare book. It is not often in Australian history that you come across a historian who is as interested in historical method – the practice of constructing history – as he is in his subject. This is evident from the first pages of the book. We are led from the present: Kenny begins with his journey in 1998 to the Wimmera, to the ruins of Ebenezer: we witness the tangible ruins of the past we are soon to be told about and they re-emerge throughout the book. He writes:

the historian’s job is to get beyond memory as it is to get beyond ruins; to approach that which was there before memory, and put memory to the test. From the scant records, from archaeology, from anthropology, from
linguistics, from memory, from analogy with peoples in other parts of Australia whose worlds have been less disrupted by Europeans, we can piece together a tentative sense of the world of the Wimmera before the European – an imagined way to join the dots.

He warns us of how the ‘gulf between the mind-set of the world we inhabit and the mind-set of the colonists in Victoria in this period was as wide as that between those colonists and the Aborigines they confronted’. Kenny is honest when he steps onto shaky ground, but asks us to allow that ‘this kind of history demands imaginative gambits that the discipline … traditionally avoids’. Kenny’s personal journey is an important part of the story, reminding us of the constant dialogue between the past and the present, and I am glad he has included this in the book. He takes his time, working through the complex systems of belief and interpretation of Christianity, pervasive racial science and Wotjobaluk lore. While it can be slow, deep reading, it is good reading: we have learnt to be attentive to detail, and the gentle conclusions that Kenny offers are rewarding.

I could continue to praise Kenny for his original and fine scholarship, his poetic style and for illuminating such an important story; however, he has just been awarded joint recipient of the Prime Minister’s History Prize which reveals the quality and positive reception of this book.

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This is a lovely story by Samantha Faulkner – a tribute to her grandfather, the sprightly and life-loving 90 year old, Ali Drummond. It is a book of which he and his family should be immensely proud. As a family history it is more than good, however its impact to a broader audience is lessened by some inherent problems, detailed later.

Ali Drummond is a man of the Torres Strait, as clearly signalled in the sub-title of the book, and he is arguably a Thursday Islander, through and through. He has lived his life to the full, among many things, as a pearl shell diver, a fisherman and a dab hand at lawn bowls. He is at home in the sea and fishing for his family remains one of his key loves. He had a carefree as well as hard life growing up on TI (Thursday Island), and it is no doubt a measure of his character and positive forbearance that saw him grasp life so eagerly with both hands. As many of his generation experienced, he lost both parents at an early age. His mother’s sisters each took some of his siblings but this splitting up of his immediate family was difficult and he headed out on the pearling luggers as soon as he could.17 It is this story of his pearling days which really animates Ali Drummond and the book as a whole.

In association with her grandfather, Samantha Faulkner introduces most of the book’s chapters with a well-known Torres Strait song. This is a very apt and creative device. Indeed, the front page contains a song about Ali Drummond himself, entitled ‘Old Men and the Sea’:

Ali had the arms of a fisherman/ the legs of a sailor/ for so long a time he lived from the riches of the sea/ working sunrise to sunset on the turn of the tides/ with hooks and lines and nets he made his living/ now he is an old man/ but his eyes shine bright when he talks about the sea/ and he caught with his hands/ the fish that fed the islands/ Ali Drummond is a young man when he talks about the sea/18

The book begins with an Introduction. This is a short recollection of a recent day on the water by Samantha Faulkner’s sister, Donisha Duff. It is a playful story, and by narrating an incident involving herself and her grandfather, it nicely reveals both the forceful character of Ali Drummond and the dynamic between him and his granddaughter. His regaling her with stories of his youth, of his expertise in the marine world, then accidentally running into a bommie as they travel home together in his dinghy, provides a fine segue into the following chapter entitled ‘Young days’.

17 Faulkner 2007: 12.
It is in this chapter and the earlier Prologue that some of the problems with the book become apparent. We learn that Ali Drummond was born on Thursday Island of a Dayak father from Sarawak and a mother of Aboriginal and Malay heritage. Ali’s mother Cissie Malay was classified by the Queensland government of the day as a ‘half-caste Aboriginal woman’ (p. 6). Her father was from Java and her mother Nara Para was a Yadhaigana Aboriginal woman from Red Island in northern Cape York. In this chapter and the Prologue Faulkner would have been better advised to build on her earlier comments about the 19th century marine traffic through the Torres Strait (p. xv). Given Ali Drummond’s cultural background she could have nicely contextualised his position as a non-Torres Strait Islander living in and around TI and the effects of this status on his life and of his descendants. Indeed, his wife Carmen Villaflor had heritage from the Philippines and Moa Island in the Torres Strait (p. 63), thus their children and grandchildren have Torres Strait Islander heritage from their mother and grandmother.

Clearly then Ali and his parents are not Torres Strait Islanders, so the descriptions in the Prologue and in this chapter of the ways in which Torres Strait Islanders were controlled under restrictive legislation are not only superfluous but confusing and contradictory. Indeed they could be easily misinterpreted. Because Ali and his family of orientation were classified as Malay (p. 7), they would not have been subjected to the same regulations of the Queensland Act,19 as were Torres Strait Islanders and Aboriginal people. This Act was a ‘racial caste system’20 exemplified by ‘clearly elaborated social and economic stratification’. Indeed during this time, Ali Drummond’s family would have occupied a position of higher status than their Aboriginal relatives and Torres Strait Islander neighbours, while being relegated to a lower status than European residents. They were members of the Malay club (see p. 7) and being classified as ‘half-castes’ as opposed to Torres Strait Islanders meant they were evacuated from TI to Cairns, Innisfail and Port Douglas during the Second World War. Torres Strait Islanders, resident primarily on the outer islands, on the other hand, were not evacuated – they were left behind to defend their islands.21

Faulkner demonstrates a confusion about the past, at times explaining that her grandfather’s family was not subjected to the Queensland Act and then at other times writing as if they were. When you know the history of Torres Strait and the applications of The Aboriginals Restriction and the Sale of Opium Act and its subsequent incarnation as the Torres Strait Islander Land Act it is possible to read between the lines, fill out the context, and interpret many of these statements. However, for readers who are not fully conversant with the cultural history of Torres Strait, and in particular the segregation and power imbalances between Aborigines, Torres Strait Islanders, ‘Half-Castes’, Malays and Europeans, many misconceptions will follow. These inaccuracies are unfortunate and would not

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19 This is the short hand commonly applied to The Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act 1879 (Qld), and its later reincarnation The Torres Strait Islander Land Act 1991 (Qld).
have occurred had a thorough content edit and check on historical accuracy been undertaken. Indeed, Faulkner could have included a description of how Ali’s and Carmen’s children and grandchildren were classified, remembering that Carmen did have Philippine-Torres Strait Islander heritage. In so doing she might have avoided some of these traps and could have given us a greater sense of the multicultural complexities and delights of life on Thursday Island and of growing up in such a dynamic family.

The next chapter ‘Life on the water’ opens with the lyrics of ‘Forty Fathoms’.22 The song reflects the movement of pearling luggers between the deep and dangerous waters around Erub (Darnley Island), and the home waters of TI. This skilfully sets the scene for tales of Ali Drummond’s life and travels as a pearlshell and trochus diver, and trepang collector in what is, not surprisingly, the longest and most detailed chapter of the book. Here Ali Drummond recollects the ways in which the shell and trepang were collected, how they worked the tides, where and how far away from TI they ventured, and his friendships with his Japanese crew. He describes the knowledge he gained as well as the foods they prepared and ate, and the trading they did with Torres Strait Islanders as they passed their islands en route to work the nearby reefs. There are vivid descriptions of food preparation and of the realities of diving: the friendships and the tensions on board, the snakes, finding good grounds, the cold, the darkness, the equipment, the tidal drift, the sharks, the bends, and some close shaves with death. However, there are sections in this chapter which lack adequate structure.

The Second World War is seen as a watershed in Torres Strait history, so it is not surprising that Faulkner includes a chapter ‘Wartime’ in which Ali Drummond worked for two years on TI and nearby islands before moving to Cairns and Mossman to join his wife and children in early 1942. The following chapter ‘Life on the land’ lacks overall interest to the general reader. It recounts what Ali Drummond did and when he did it, but perhaps it falls flat because the sea is really where he is at home. While in Mossman Ali Drummond cut cane, and when he was called up to join the army, his boss successfully argued that he was needed to work on his farm.

In 1948 Ali Drummond and the family were back on his beloved TI, and the following chapter ‘Family’ details how he met his wife, provides genealogical details of her family, and of their subsequent children. Unfortunately it is recounted in a fairly pedestrian way. This information is no doubt very useful for members of the Drummond extended family but not very engaging for the broader public. These are the sort of small stories which we all tell within families, of small events which signify a lot to us as family members. But, their significance or interest beyond the family is limited, especially when they are presented in this way.

The final chapter ‘And now’ brings us up to date with Ali Drummond’s life since his retirement in 1978 and the death of his wife. It is clear that he continues to have enormous energy, love of life, love of his family, love of his people, and love of TI.

Overall there are far too many factual, spelling and grammatical errors in this book (eg Saibi p. x; Arukun p. 16; Brilliant Point instead of Vrilya Point; missing preposition ‘of’ p. 11; missing word ‘know’ p. 65; p. 73 should read pounds (as in money value) and not pounds, as in weight; p. 41 ‘the scarce of oxygen in his blood’, and so on. These should have been picked up and corrected in a thorough edit of the manuscript by the publishing house before it went to press.

Nevertheless, despite these shortcomings, this book makes a significant contribution to the oeuvres of biography, history, music and fiction about the experiences of people living in and around Thursday Island. Key among these works are the late Ellie Gaffney’s autobiography *Somebody Now*, Betty Osborne’s history of the evacuation of ‘mixed-race’ women from TI during the Second World War, and Terri Janke’s recent novel *Butterfly Song*, as well as the music of the Mills Sisters and Henry (Seaman) Dan which foreground and celebrate TI as ‘home’. This biography adds to that burgeoning corpus of stories and songs about TI and indeed several of these songs preface most of the chapters: ‘Old Men and the Sea’, ‘Old TI’, ‘Forty Fathoms’, and ‘Port War Hill’. *Life B’Long Ali Drummond* is a study of a life lived on and around TI. Despite its flaws, it provides us with a snapshot of TI and surrounding areas from the early twentieth century to the present. As she describes her grandfather’s life, Faulkner gives us a sense of the different businesses, the segregation policies, the carefree as well as the hard life, the details of diving, and the significance of the marine world of Torres Strait to her grandfather. Fundamentally, this is a personal, family history:

If there is a message in this book it would be to appreciate what you have, namely your family, and to remember that we all, each and every one of us, have a story to tell (p. viii).

References


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It is strange that the name Doreen Kartinyeri is not as well known as those of other Aboriginal leaders, such as Langton or Dodson. A little over a decade ago, Kartinyeri was one of the most controversial figures in the nation, famous for her role in the Hindmarsh Island Bridge affair which was in many ways the beginning of the battles over understandings of history and land that became known as the culture wars.

Kartinyeri was the most prominent proponent of what became known in the media as ‘secret women’s business’ – the claim that the site of the proposed bridge at the mouth of the Murray was the site of sacred importance of Ngarrindjeri women, for reasons that could not be disclosed to men.

The affair resulted in a Royal Commission that found Kartinyeri and her fellows had fabricated ‘secret women’s business’. The findings of that Royal Commission were later effectively overturned by a Federal Court case in 2001. The whole issue dragged on for years, damaging almost everyone who touched it. It was a crucial episode in our history and in our understanding of Aboriginal claims to land in the wake of the High Court Mabo judgement.

The affair brought several important people to public prominence through their denunciation of Kartinyeri and her fellows. One was Dr Ron Brunton, now on the ABC Board. In 1996 Brunton wrote that the new Howard government’s handing of the Hindmarsh Island Bridge affair would ‘set the stage for its approach to Aboriginal affairs, and its attitude to probity in public life’. He was right.

Another who came to national attention through Hindmarsh Island was the columnist Christopher Pearson, briefly a speechwriter for Prime Minister John Howard and later on the SBS Board. Yet Kartinyeri disappeared from the popular consciousness. When she died at the end of 2007, there were very few headlines.

Kartinyeri has been much written about, but this book is so far as I know the first time she has spoken for herself at length. It is really a piece of oral history related by Kartinyeri to cultural heritage consultant and historian Sue Anderson, who has done an admirable job of curation and compilation. Plainly written, retaining a sense of Kartinyeri’s voice, it is a story of resilience that also provides insights into both the persistence and adaptability of culture.

While we catch glimpses of the trauma surrounding the Hindmarsh Island Bridge affair, the more original and unique content is about Kartinyeri’s life history.
Anthropologist Peter Sutton, in an interview for my 2003 book about the affair, expressed the opinion that the idea that ‘secret women’s business’ was a fabrication was now ‘insupportable’. He said:

The balance of probabilities lies with evidence suggesting jealously guarded fragmentary parts of maybe several old traditions, whose custodians tended to treat such knowledge as private or family property, emerging in spite of competitive politics between individuals and factions.24

This book gives a context for that statement. It is a close-grained account of a twentieth-century Aboriginal woman’s life. It helps us understand how, despite decades of dislocation, missionary rule and prejudice, Kartinyeri was able to learn enough about her culture to be accepted by others as a custodian.

Doreen Kartinyeri was a thin, wiry woman, a smoker, a swearer and a fighter who polarised emotions long before the name Hindmarsh Island hit the headlines. Born at the Point McLeay Aboriginal reserve on the edge of the lakes at the Murray mouth in 1935, she was sent away to the Fullarton Girls Home in Adelaide at the age of ten following her mother’s death. Her baby sister was removed by the state against the family’s will.

After a period serving as a domestic, Kartinyeri married and moved to the Point Pearce mission on Yorke Peninsula, where she developed a strong friendship with her Auntie Rosie Kropinyeri. She claimed that it was when she was pregnant with the first of her nine children, sitting on the beach with Auntie Rosie, that she was told, all mixed up with practical advice on pregnancy and childbirth, the stories of the lower lakes and ‘Kumarangk’ – the Ngarrindjeri name for Hindmarsh Island.

Kartinyeri gives fascinating accounts of mission life, and how she began her work as an historian by recording the history of the Point McLeay and Point Pearce families, much of which had been lost through dislocation. She published several books of genealogy, and was awarded an honorary doctorate. This work led to a job in the Family History Unit of the South Australian Museum, which is where she was working in the early 1990s, when she heard of a plan to build a bridge from the little town of Goolwa to Hindmarsh Island, which sits at the mouth of the Murray River.

Kartinyeri first contracted stomach cancer during the Hindmarsh Island Bridge affair. She blamed the Royal Commission, and the building of the bridge, for her illness. When I was interviewing her in 2001 she predicted that the Murray would soon stop flowing because the bridge had been built, and that all Australians would suffer as a result. I imagine she saw herself as vindicated by recent events.

Meanwhile her genealogies continue to be an important source for South Australian Aboriginal people trying to trace their histories.

Kartinyeri or ‘Auntie Dodo’ as she was known to her family and friends, emerges from this account as neither a saccharine romanticised elder nor the scheming manipulator her enemies portrayed, but a full, vibrant and complex human being, and a survivor.

For historians, there is much of interest, including insights into the ways in which pre-contact Aboriginal culture both adapted and persisted through the years of missionary dominance.

Besides this, Kartinyeri was herself a significant figure in our history, deserving of entries in, but so far neglected by, our standard biographical reference works. It is a good thing this book has been written.

Reference


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Antonio Buti in *Sir Ronald Wilson: A Matter of Conscience* has delivered a meticulous, well documented and sympathetic account of the career of Sir Ronald Wilson, but this story of a life remains puzzling. All the clues are carefully presented, but questions linger after closing the book.

There is no doubting the achievement and the drive. The young orphan from Geraldton, Western Australia became a Spitfire pilot, a Crown Prosecutor, State Solicitor-General, High Court Justice, University Chancellor, President of the Uniting Church, Human Rights Equal Opportunity Commission and Royal Commissioner. All of this was achieved without a full secondary school education.

There is, also, no doubting the passion. To every task, whether judicial, advocatory or religious, Wilson was a man of energy, commitment and zeal. In his final major piece of work, the 1997 Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission *Bringing Them Home* report his passion became the subject of national controversy and international interest.

Neither is the man’s essential goodness, generosity and humanity in question. Buti accumulates many accounts of the respect Sir (‘Call me Ron’) Ronald Wilson gave to others from all walks of life and that he was accorded in return. As Buti describes it, ‘he lived simply, so that others would simply live’, and rejected many of the trappings of high office to which he was entitled.

It is the man himself who remains an enigma, although Buti competently and coherently outlines the pieces of the puzzle, leaving the reader to decide for herself in the end.

Buti is transparent in outlining the apparent contradictions of the man himself and clearly documents the transitions Wilson makes over time. He is strongest when describing Wilson’s thinking as a prosecutor and judge, sharing his subject’s background in Western Australian law and practice. This is especially valuable in gaining an understanding of Wilson’s early career as a prosecutor in Perth in the 1960s, most famously in three notorious and related murder trials. Wilson’s aggressive attack on the character of the accused in the *Beamish case* would lead to a death sentence.

Forty-four years later, the ‘playing it hard’ elements of Wilson’s summation to the jury would be criticised by the Supreme Court in a successful appeal. Similarly, the convicted murderer Cooke went to the gallows in 1961, declaring the innocence of two men, Beamish and Button, convicted for murders they did not commit; Cooke had. In these cases, Wilson was unapologetic for his prosecutorial role. As Buti concludes ‘his job was to prosecute in an honest and
ethical manner, which he maintained he did’ (p. 131). Wilson’s quick mind, analytical powers and prowess in advocacy were tools that would take the young lawyer far. He had little patience at the time for speculation on the morality of the law and justice. Such was not his brief.

In his active ongoing leadership role in the Presbyterian and later Uniting Churches, however, Wilson explicitly argued for the concept of service, with Christians having an obligation to serve God through their works in the world. He compartmentalised his religious view, claiming it had no effect on his work for the Crown. As moderator for the Presbyterian Church, he was responsible for overseeing the management of Sister Kate’s Home for Children, later to gain notoriety as a place of internment and forced change for Aboriginal children. Aboriginal leaders Sue Gordon and Rob Riley went through Sister Kate’s and were scathing about its management practices and attitudes and its role in separation policies. Rob Riley was to say that institutionalisation ‘made us grow up thinking that we were totally alone in the world. We had no family, no belongings, no identity’.25

Buti comments that ‘Wilson never made the connections’. As a senior officer in the Western Australian legal system, it is difficult to comprehend that Wilson could have been unaware of the issues at the time, and would not be aware of the history of separations in that state until he became involved in the Bringing Them Home report for the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission 30 years later.

Buti speculates that this ‘ignorance provides another reason to view Wilson as a man lacking in curiosity about the world outside the “box” of his profession, or unless it had an impact upon his immediate task at hand’ (p. 146). At this stage of his life, there is not much evidence of Wilson thinking beyond his brief, or of making connections between his role and that of the society outside the offices of the Law Department, where he started work as a teenager.

Such insularity would necessarily erode as Wilson moved his career forward to becoming Western Australia’s Solicitor-General, a knight of the realm, and that state’s first High Court justice in 1979. The latter appointment was notable: in 103 years only two justices, Wilson and then Toohey, have been appointed from outside the three major eastern states. He maintained his engagement in the new Uniting Church, as moderator in Western Australia and later president of the national church, making time to volunteer for three weeks as a builder’s labourer in the Aboriginal community of Wiluna in 1985.

On the bench, Wilson served, as always, with energy, zeal and legal acuity. He will not be remembered as a reforming judge, most often coming down on the side of the rights of the states in the federation, especially against the use of international conventions to shape Australian common law.

Looking back in the year 2000, he told Perth radio that

I’d rather not be judged by my record on the High Court … I really suppressed my personal inclination and it is a lasting cause of sorrow that there were some Aboriginal cases that came before us when I was in the minority. I was so thankful that I was and that the majority decision represented my heart.

Such hindsight revisionism is remarkable. Buti puts it on the record, but leaves the reader to judge.

Antonio Buti provides an excellent synopsis of the landmark cases where Wilson’s head apparently over-ruled his heart. These included the Koowarta case, the Tasmanian Dam case and most significantly Mabo (No. 1). In all cases, Wilson was in the minority. In the latter case he was alone in deciding that the 1985 Queensland Act (Queensland Coast Islands Declaratory Act), in extinguishing native title, was not inconsistent with the Racial Discrimination Act 1979 (Cth). Buti effectively explores Wilson’s thinking on the issues of law that influenced his minority judgement, and his view that formal equality before the law does not achieve genuine equality despite knowing that if his arguments were accepted, inequality would be further entrenched. Wilson told the ABC Law Report that ‘my heart and my mind went in different directions’.

Wilson retired from the High Court in 1989 but did not in any way retire from public life. He was appointed by Prime Minister Bob Hawke to the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation in 1991. For this period, Buti’s account is not so informative or analytical. Appointed as Patrick Dodson’s deputy, also a Western Australian, Wilson was instrumental in ensuring the newly formed Council (and its Chairman) kept out of the political fray in response to the High Court decision on Mabo (No. 2) handed down in 1992. In part, such constraint was perhaps sensibly aimed at maintaining cross-party and industry support for the nascent reconciliation process, but it also suited Wilson’s innate conservatism, policy caution and legal rectitude. Observing Wilson at close quarters during the early years of the reconciliation process, from the Council’s secretariat, I personally find it hard to recall evidence for the disjunct between heart and head that Wilson claimed in hindsight.

It was another Dodson brother, Mick, who worked with Sir Ronald as co-chair of the 1997 Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission Bringing Them Home report. This was the experience, if there was a single experience, which allowed Wilson’s heart to overtake his head. Some might argue that it ended up on his sleeve. Buti provides an excellent summary of the process that led to the report, the moving evidence taken in oral hearings, the reception by the government, and importantly, the criticism unleashed at the report. Much of the criticism attacked the man rather than the ball, and the man under attack was Sir Ronald.

The transformation was remarkable. The champion of state rights on the High Court bench arguing against the use of international conventions in the Tasmanian Dams case became a proselyte for internationally defined human rights on
indigenous issues. Buti outlines Wilson’s accusations of policy genocide, pushed against the advice of Mick Dodson, against the Commonwealth for its treatment of children removed by the states under well-meaning but devastating policies of assimilation. This was a transformation of the conservative into the radical critic and was Wilson’s final and most celebrated act of advocacy. Buti is understated in his analysis but indicates his preference for tracing the changed Wilson to the emotionally charged experience of the *Bringing Them Home* hearings.

*A Matter of Conscience: Sir Ronald Wilson* is a complex tale well worth reading by those with an interest in issues of Aboriginal history, Australian law and the evolution of conscience.

**Reference**


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Canberra
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Time, history and pre-history in Peter Hiscock’s Archaeology of Ancient Australia:

Time likewise does not exist by itself,
But as sense follows from things themselves
Of what has been done in the past, what now is present,
And what in addition to follow after

Lucretius I, 458–460

John Mulvaney’s groundbreaking 1969 work, The Prehistory of Australia, revealed for the first time in a major publication the potential for a national archaeology and laid the foundation for a succession of works on the theme. While the aim and expectation of an Australian archaeology has remained the context of the endeavour has changed. As an academic discipline, Australian archaeology has in the intervening 40 years been increasingly suspended between questions of practice and legitimacy which are often characterised as a product of a post-colonial conflict between ‘science’ and Indigenous rights and interests. While there is an undoubted validity to this as a discursive framework, there remains the possibility that it is primarily a reification of archaeological practice in Australia, rather than a description of its underlying material and intellectual structure. At this discursive level the discipline is characterised as an unresolvable tangle of power relations evoking ethical debates while obscuring tensions within the underlying archaeological practice. It is the contention of Peter Hiscock’s Archaeology of Ancient Australia that Australian archaeology reflects not a post-colonial conflict of rights and identities but a failure at the very heart of the discipline to be sufficiently aware of its material and temporal context. Hiscock’s critique produces a ‘pre-history’ of Australia which attempts to redefine possibilities of archaeological practice at the continental level and by so doing raises a series of important questions about the contemporary nature of the discipline and its meaning.

Australian archaeology is practiced almost exclusively within the strongly proscribed functional domains of heritage management, academic production and contract archaeology. Within these structures the ‘discipline’ ensures its discursive reproduction via a series of ordered and compliance-driven professionalised practices. In the face of these limitations the place of large-scale continental synthesises like the Archaeology of Ancient Australia, has become problematic. While in one direction it is dependent on the product of archaeological research, which has itself declined in the last 20 years; in the other direction the gap between the newer professionalised practice and the older synthetic modes of meaning and value production has now become sufficiently large to ensure

26 See Brown 2008.
that the intellectual importance of studies like Hiscock’s lies as much in its relation to the proceeding syntheses and more submerged esoteric concerns as it does to the current ‘disciplinary’ practice. Beyond the need for undergraduate textbooks, archaeological practice in Australia does not appear greatly concerned with the meaning and status of archaeological knowledge outside of the now dominant frameworks of community identity and heritage management. It may be, however, a sign of a maturing (or fragmenting discipline) that there are now sufficient works aiming at a continental synthesis for their respective intellectual approaches to pull away from the domain of contemporary professional practice and map an intellectual largely of their own making.

Although *Archaeology of Ancient Australia* has a deceptively conventional structure and can be read as an excellent textbook this aspect is not the concern of this review which concentrates more on Hiscock’s critical structure. At its core Hiscock’s work aligns itself with an approach to Australian archaeology which sees archaeology as a material practice. His work may be positioned closer to White and O’Connell’s work than the more recent syntheses of Flood, Lourandos and Mulvaney and Kamminga. The culture-historical approach, foundational to the discipline in Australia and characteristic of most of the proceeding syntheses, he argues, is over-reliant on fusing historical and archaeological temporal horizons, generating a deeply constrained and limited knowledge of the pre-historic past. In the favouring of, what may be seen by contemporary standards as a reactive ‘scientific’ approach, Hiscock is effectively able to sustain challenges to both the conventional post-colonial concerns and the more conventional use of ethnographic analogy in Australian archaeology. He is able to do this because the work is outwardly the most philosophically programmatic of the major syntheses. The humanistic tradition which has and continues to inform the discipline is explicitly rejected in favour of ‘science’ which is seen as the key feature of modern archaeology – the founding fathers of modern archaeology in the nineteenth century are described as ‘scientists’ (p. 1) not archaeologists. The important point to be made here is that for Hiscock this is not simply a rhetorical point; his position is very consciously rationalist and materialist in a way which we have not seen in Australian archaeology to date. The epigraph from Lucretius at the head of this review summarises the work’s core intellectual position; one that has its origins in Hiscock’s early training in Classics. Readers attempting to read the work through the lenses of the more recent humanist and post-humanist traditions may find, as a consequence, its approach difficult.

While following a broad chronological pattern *Archaeology of Ancient Australia*’s structure is based on a series of case studies around familiar themes like Arnhem Land rock art, Holocene technology, human population change, economic structures and relationships to landscape (including unusually mythological relationships). In these Hiscock examines the evidence and its

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29 Hiscock pers. comm.
interpretation over the past 50 or so years and in doing so is deeply sceptical of the tendency to privilege narrative tidiness over the logic of material and temporal process. Consistent with his underlying philosophical position and his specialist knowledge of lithic analysis Hiscock sees physical processes such as decay, failure, chance and loss as setting boundary conditions on possible interpretation; while adaptive processes provide the vital potential for change. Deeply aligned to the approaches of processual or the 'new archaeology' of the 1960s and 1970s, its rigorous application in Australia has unexpected implications. As change is seen as a product of these boundary conditions it cannot be simply charted via descriptive analysis or narratives emphasising temporal continuities.

Hiscock’s work is also unusual in his concern for what may be termed ‘archaeological constructions’ as well as interpretations.30 In their Prehistory of Australia Mulvaney and Kamminga reflected the conventional view that where Australian archaeology was lacking in material richness it could be supplemented by reference to the extensive ethno-historical record of Aboriginal people.31 Despite their caution that this should be done with due recognition of the critical historical method, the result Hiscock argues was to see the ethnography as presenting a form of timeless horizon of useful analogy.

Since historical observers expected that Aborigines had lived since the earliest periods without substantial change it was easy to think that descriptions of Aboriginal life and society in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries could give archaeologists an insight into how Aborigines lived in more ancient times. (p. 4)

Instead of informing archaeological practice through the rigorous testing of analogy the power of this ethnographic imagery invariably resulted in an archaeology as a form of historicised ethnography where the primary aim is to ensure the security of temporal continuity over the power of temporal difference. Hiscock’s response is to bracket off the historical, including the ethnographic record by situating both the archaeological and historical records in temporal frameworks which are uniquely their own. This is a deceptively simple step but the effect is substantial. What links there are between the two sources must be justified using historical time frames which are recognised as limited and reflecting in some instances Aboriginal interpretations of their own archaeological pasts not a reportage on it (the echo effect).

What differentiates Hiscock’s approach from Mulvaney and Kamminga’s is his replacement of caution in using analogy with an abiding scepticism towards its value at any time. The conventional interpretative structure can be viewed through this move to be deeply ambivalent because it simultaneously represents both the archaeological and historical pasts as identical while maintaining their separation. The clearest example of the difficulty is the mechanism needed to

30 See Guillaume 1990.
bridge this gap between the two distinct domains. In the interpretation of the late Holocene an intensification process is seen as being required to fuse the limited Holocene archaeological record to the ethnographic horizon. Social competition and population growth have been seen as the primary driving forces of the linking process. This ‘construction’ can only be achieved, Hiscock contends, through the discounting of the effects of material decay and contrary regional variants; the interpretative mechanism is being driven more by the need to ensure temporal congruity than the evidence of the material record.

This scepticism is not a dismissal of the value of historical, ethnographic, anthropological or ethnoarchaeological studies per se nor is it an attempt to disenfranchise Aboriginal interests in their past nor to down-play the power of their traditions to inform and reveal. Initially it simply makes the observation that Aboriginal peoples of the past are reflected in a material record which is not necessarily commensurate with European colonial observations. Although many Australian archaeologists would acknowledge this, Hiscock’s work shows that the ethnographic vision continues to be a central, pervasive and mesmerising presence which requires a continual overcoming. The degree to which this rigour is maintained over the length of the book is patchy and there are places, not unexpectedly, where the careful reader will find examples of analogical thought. The strongly analogical discussion of the long-term changes in Rainbow Serpent images is one of the more engaging of the discussions despite its incorporation of a distinctively ethnographic interpretation of a set of pre-historic rock art images. Some will also take issue with the reliance on interpretative frameworks drawn from contemporary managerial and biological discourses and question their explanatory superiority to ethnographic analogy.

What characterises the work and what makes it such a good textbook is the emphasis on the analysis of the record. Readers are shown that the careful examination of material is capable of generating knowledge that is more firmly grounded in the record than the set of conventional signifiers of presences which they tend to play with at the present. One necessary consequence of the close study for the practice or constructions of the discipline is that the resistances inherent in the materiality are seen as reflective of its reality not as symptoms of its failure. In the face of this it is argued that we should read the evidence directly and (until there is firm evidence to the contrary) see the Australian record as that of a modern people, fully equipped with language, art, technological, social and economic capacity from the earliest time. Although this is now supported by the contemporary evolutionary evidence for the emergence of modern humans it is a more challenging proposition than the temptation to see ancient Australia as representing an insight into a pre-modern humanity.

At the continental level the application of these two basic propositions, the bounded nature of the archaeological record and the modernity of its subjects, has unexpected impacts. Firstly, the approach challenges the significance of colonial processes and their records as both the end and the final meaning of archaeological temporality. It does not, however, erase the presence of either and the relation of the historical and the archaeological becomes a zone of genuine
complexity. As archaeology is no longer required to develop narratives which secure the archaeological to the historical record they may either flow through or past each other according to their own temporal and material dynamics. Or they may represent unbridgeable gaps and collisions. If we take, for example, the proposition that in the past the ancestors of Aboriginal people in south-eastern Australia sought to manage contingency measured as ‘risk’ by the application of technological developments in stone tool technology how is it possible to relate this to a contemporary observation that Aboriginal people in the same region manage contingency through social relationships as Heil and Macdonald argue? Is it possible through a process of material reasoning to see this as a case of profound cultural change or is it simply not possible because the temporal and explanatory frameworks are so incompatible that the interpretations are forever locked apart? There is clearly ground here for further examination.

There is one further basic proposition that shapes this work and it is one which is the most difficult to articulate because it is expressed in the negative. This is the problem of the role of structures of causality within culture itself. Hiscock come closest to a post-structuralist position in his rejection of overarching and fixed structural relations whether they are superstructure infrastructure dialectics, the primacy of social relations, cybernetic feedback loops or enframing environmental conditions. In contrast he favours indeterminate complexity and the powers of adaptation mediating social, cultural and environmental variability.

Claims about the causal role of social processes or responses to environment that are embedded within debates of the intensification model centre on questions of whether events and trends in history, and pre-history before it, were caused by material forces or alternatively by ideas and social interactions. This is an unnecessary contrast because both phenomena were perpetually present in ancient foraging life and each shaped the other. (p. 266)

Archaeological and historical evidence for economic and social changes during the last millennium gives no support for claims that there was invariably one process of change or a single prime-mover in cultural reconfigurations. Economies and settlement systems were restructured over only a few decades or less, making it impractical to disentangle causes and effects with the low chronological resolution available to archaeologists. (p. 284)

At a general level Hiscock shares the characteristic of many of his fellow archaeologists in presenting key hypotheses as explanations. This is justified in the humanist tradition by the assumption that the explanation partakes in a common humanity which is recoverable and meaningful through time. The problem Hiscock faces and has unfortunately no space to address, is that having rejected this tradition, he exposes the more profound problem that if the discipline is to be more ‘scientific’ it lacks an equally compelling (social) scientific

basis for explanation. It is unclear whether this is a product of the incapacity of the archaeological record to delineate the necessary distinctions for such a science to develop or if it is a real feature of the societies which produced the record. If the latter the unarticulated hypotheses underlying the explanation of change are that there are structural features of pre-historic human societies (or possibly all societies) which lack the capacity to either articulate the dominance of a component or that the components are themselves poorly differentiated. If we bypass the question of how it can be known that the various components are maintained as separate and perpetual and continually interactive, there remains the sense that humans are constituted by forces which are never clearly present but appear as ever changing combinations dependent on the logic of the situation which can never be clearly articulated. The difficulty is that of deducing human history and agency from a logic defined by the possibilities of material remains alone. What this favours is an archaeology composed of localised event series determined by external processes which can only be glossed by single broad mechanisms like ‘adaptation’ and ‘change’. Here archaeology is revealed to be a form of natural history or as it is glossed ‘pre-history’.

What Hiscock means by the term ‘pre-history’ is not made clear and it is another of case of a significant unarticulated hypothesis informing the work. The question of whether ‘pre-history’ (as opposed to prehistory) represents some universal underlying state of nature and necessity governing all human society or a particular historical phase in the conventional sense is not addressed. The tenor of the work would suggest the former, however, in revealing the record in this way the question which arises is whether Hiscock has produced an archaeology which has sufficiently justified its practice in Australia. Stripped of its higher humanised (but colonial and compromised) meaning the remaining pictures of local adaptation and change tend to compress the record into a disconnected series with uniform significance. While the advantage of this is that it militates against the construction of grand syntheses the underlying difficulty is that this compression reveals the record to be less ‘human’ than traditionally imagined and more intellectually problematic.

Despite these difficulties Archaeology of Ancient Australia is by far the most rigorously examined of the syntheses written in Australian archaeology to date and as such it has challenged old assumptions and added to the rigour of the interpretation. Freed from the constraints of having to refer constantly to a historical horizon Hiscock’s book has an unexpected feature for a work of ‘science’; frees itself from the rigid temporal grid which has so pervasively dominated contemporary archaeological practice in Australia and circulates around specific regional temporalities. Welcome as this approach is there is a price to be paid. The naturalisation of the record via the singular process of ‘adaptation’ invokes a temporality of ‘eternal-recurrence’. This works against the possibility of narrative meaning while the use of physical processes as the central mechanism of archaeological reasoning evokes logic of necessity which also limits the very human capacities which separate it from a natural science. This may be the reason why some critics have reacted strongly against the outcome
of Hiscock’s work while begrudgingly acknowledging its logical power. In its favour is the possibility of multiple phases of cultural development which have not been, to date, a particularly strong feature of interpretation in Australian archaeology. Whether this change is a product of the limitation of material variability, as Hiscock would argue, or the product of the eternal revelation of the ‘every-when’ of Aboriginal thought, it points to the potential for a more temporally nuanced archaeology in Australia.

References


Contributors

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