

Chapter 3

Racial theory and a religious solution, 1920s to 1945

Between the two world wars racial theories abounded as to what to do in relation to the 'half-caste Aboriginal problem'. The white frontier attitude was that bush Aborigines were devils, but as time went by they and their off-spring became a useful economic asset in the face of the absence of a white labour force, and finally there was the Baldwin Spencer and JW Bleakley idea of removing half-castes from the bush people and institutionalising them as educated labour. For my mother, racial theories meant little because in Adelaide in the post war era it just meant more difficulties looking after two children with few resources. However, a solution was provided for her that she could not refuse! As a six year old, I would have had little understanding of the implications of my mother's relief but this alienation most certainly influenced my attitudes to others. This feeling of loneliness that affected me in growing up in an institution, away from a mother's affection, would have, no doubt, echoed among the other children with whom I identified.

The solution for my mother came from Father Percy Smith's decade-long observation of half-castes; combined with his strong religious beliefs. In 1945, Father Smith was demobbed from his role as a military chaplain, and as the superintendent of a new institution in Adelaide contemplated the idea that, if educated, boys of mixed racial descent could be equal to other Australians. Throughout my adolescence I often wondered whether Father Smith did what he did for the military, the church or for government. But for what ever reason, Father Smith put forward the theory that if you took half-caste children out of their dependent, poverty stricken decrepit circumstances, put them in urban society backed by religion and public education, then you could transform them into citizens of equal worth. With this strategy he, like those who supported him, thought that that would be an end to the half-caste problem. In this simple religious view he was wrong – it was only the beginning!

Whatever other people's religious faith was about, overcoming class and racial prejudices was a romantic approach embedded in Father Smith's unyielding Christian beliefs. But of course, faith is not limited to religion alone! Father Smith believed that, if provided with the same prospects as working-class people, half-castes would triumph. Like other well-meaning priests, scientists and bureaucrats such as Baldwin Spencer, and like Father Smith's friend and colleague Charles Duguid, Father Smith believed his plan would solve the half-

caste 'problem'. This was an explicitly bold perspective, but put simplistically it was both a class and racial minefield, with no tested social evidence of its outcome. For me and others who were the subjects of his experiment in social engineering, this was the beginning of a long period as 'wards of the Commonwealth and the states'. Initially it covered the period from 1945 under Father Smith's care, right up until the second term of the Menzies Liberal-Country Party's rule and beyond. Father Smith's ideas need some discussion in this chapter as well as some idea of my own feelings about the impact of these religious and political policies.

To appreciate Father Smith's predicament some historical understanding of the causes of his actions need appraisal, other than simply my own family connections and what happened to me. There were a number of forces at work. The 1927 Coniston massacre inquiry left the minds of the white people in the Northern Territory at ease but stuck fast in Aborigines' minds. The pastoralists, on the other hand, shaped up for a confrontation over wages for half-castes for the quality of work they did; and whether government would train staff for them to continue exploiting the delicate desert lands for profit. Lastly, Aborigines were banished from the Alice Springs town areas only to return as day labour.

The Commonwealth had ruled the Territory for nearly 20 years up until 1930, and little had gone smoothly so far as the 'race' question was concerned. Half-caste children had been shifted to Jay Creek with Ida Standley as Matron,¹ and the national economic depression constrained building there which meant children were forced to live, once more, in hovels. The issue of sending girls to Adelaide as domestics was an administrative nightmare not only because those girls who went were all 'wards of the Commonwealth' but also because they became stranded in Adelaide, as if jailed; female inmates at Jay Creek feared that the older girls would be next. More problems arose as pastoralists in the Alice Springs area employed young girls, as young as ten and eleven as domestics in the 1920s; one of these girls could well have been my mother. The government and pastoralists were at loggerheads over unresolved payment issues and many of the half-caste girls had no knowledge of their predicament and were shifted around ignorant of their rights, without payment, well into their twenties.²

Tuition, and 'master-and-servant', theories abounded while, at the same time pastoralists, trade unions, the Protector of Aborigines and Northern Territory administrators met periodically without success. Gradually these interest groups moved to make changes to the *Aboriginals Ordinance 1918* (Cth), setting out amendments to the 'Apprentices (half-castes) Regulations'. The protectors,

1 Letter from Deane to Secretary Commonwealth Treasury, February 1929, CRS A659, 1939/1/996, NAA, Canberra.

2 Letter Bleakley to Commonwealth, 1929, CRS A659, 1939/1/996, NAA, Canberra. See also 'Half Castes Employed outside NT', CRS A1, 1936/7846, NAA, Canberra.

on the one hand, wanted action to relieve themselves of the pain of getting Aborigines employed, while others such as the stock and station agents and the Territory lessees' association wanted all labour subsidised.³ The system worked against Aboriginal society at all levels. What did this have to do with Father Percy Smith and how did this happen?

Pastoralists were represented not just in the Northern Territory but in the large pastoral markets throughout Australia by stock and station agents like Elder Smith, Goldsborough Mort and the British cattle company, Vestey Investment Agency. These agents played politics to ensure that pastoralists got land leases 'dirt cheap', and were provided with free stock routes to railheads, windmills for travelling stock, dog and buffalo control subsidies, cheap 'black labour', cheap transport for travel to fatten stock for ultimate sale and attractive taxation benefits. Half-caste institutions were created to satisfy European women who thought Aboriginal women caused their husbands' sexual appetites to boil over and to educate labour for domestic and pastoral employment. By contrast Aborigines were bereft of almost all economic or political representation. The Bishop of Carpentaria sent Father Percy Smith to service baptised Aboriginal Anglicans and to care for their moral safety, and he was appalled at what he saw.⁴

The question was, then, whether Father Percy Smith would be part of the solution or part of the problem? Government agents segregated the half-castes from their bush relatives, and concentrated them in hovels for police and patrol officers' convenience. They placed them in institutions, took away their liberties, and, those males in charge of female employees either made them pregnant or sent them to remote pastoralists to do likewise. In short, stock and station agents and their clients acted as agents of profit. In addition, these privateers themselves became barriers against any humanitarian changes to Aboriginal male and female workers' emancipation.⁵ The Bleakley report of 1927 looked at both half-caste and 'full-blood' labour conditions; whereupon the Native Welfare Department through Dr Cook began preparing changes that would appease pastoralists and their agents.

Protector Cook was a medical doctor with expertise in the management of leprosy. In this period, however, Cook was head of Commonwealth health with a significant role in controlling Aborigines; he fought for his ideas on managing race on two fronts. On the one hand, there was the question of wages and employment for Aborigines of full- and mixed descent. The issue of Aboriginal labour was emerging as early as 1911 with half-castes as the focus but by 1935

3 'Half-Caste Apprentice Regulations', CRS A1, 1933/479, folios 1-10, NAA, Canberra.

4 Smith J 1999: 13-74.

5 'Half-Caste Apprentice Regulations', CRS A1, 1933/479, folios 1-10, NAA, Canberra.

the issue began to be understood as a racial question. The management of Aborigines, and in particular the children, was proving difficult to organise as quickly as government wanted. On the other hand, Cook practised melding ideas of managing 'race' by laying the groundwork for 'assimilation'. What this meant was that Aborigines, either full- or mixed blood, had neither claims of heritage nor legal, civil or political rights. Christians wanted only two things: first a monopoly over any moral charges they may gain control of; and, second, to Christianise as they pleased. Equally, pastoralists wanted free or subsidised labour. Profit demanded the workers be ready and it mattered little about labour laws or Aboriginal social organisation! After reading the Bleakley report Dr Cook questioned the views espoused by Baldwin Spencer's two reports, one in 1911-1912 and the other in 1923-1924, in which Baldwin Spencer claimed that half-castes were the ruin of full-bloods.⁶ Cook wrote that although half-castes were considered to be Aborigines, they were regarded as whites for the purposes of government policy and were useful labour. Cook faced ignorance on both sides: his superiors in Canberra were blocked by their racial prejudice while pastoralists wanted free or heavily subsidised labour.⁷

Dr Cook argued that if half-castes were treated as whites it meant that assimilation policies were one step away from adoption by Australian society. He wrote that: if the half-caste is to be admitted to full citizenship as a white, that those influences which press him towards the blacks' camp should be as far as possible removed. To this end it is desirable that he should marry young and marry a girl of his own stock. A number of eligible half-caste girls are being and will be maintained at Government expense in Darwin and should be available to marry these boys.⁸

Dr Cook convinced the union movement that government was on its side as the matter went before the Arbitration Court. The Court ruled that Aborigines were a part of organised labour, but were covered by the *Aboriginals Ordinance 1918-1930*. This Act stipulated what wages and conditions Aborigines could be paid under.⁹ This left open the payment of apprentices or female labour and in turn allowed employers to continue to exploit Aborigines, in general, outside organised labour. This included inmates in the half-caste institutions of Alice Springs who did not need to be paid; so for half-caste child labour it was business as usual. Like the religious representatives, Dr Cook went on refining his perspective on how he was going to manage the 'half-caste problem'. Part

6 'Report on Hermannsburg', CRS A431/1, 1947/2348, NAA, Canberra.

7 'Half-Caste Apprentice Regulations', CRS A1, 1933/479, folios 53-55, NAA, Canberra.

8 'Half-Caste Apprentice Regulations', CRS A1, 1933/479, folios 53-55, NAA, Canberra.

9 'Half-Caste Apprentice Regulations', CRS A1, 1933/479, folio 291, NAA, Canberra.

of the plan was first to prevent half-caste women walking the streets, thereby offending the sensitivities of the few whites in towns en route to Darwin, and second, to examine them for diseases before confining them in institutions.¹⁰

A storm of criticism continued around ideas of managing 'race' in general and, more specifically, laying the groundwork for future ideas of 'assimilation'. This process was typified by colonial practices across Australia against Aborigines and their descendents and played itself out in the hands of the 'intelligentsia'. Anthropologists, who feared reprisals against their ideas, their self-interests and their advocacy, practised professional silence. Historians vacated the field as the province of anthropology and archaeology. The city newspapers haunted the managers of 'race': governments, pastoralists, the church, the scribes of the humanities and native administrations. The journalist and author Ernestine Hill told readers across Australia in the 1930s that libertarianism – sexual licence – had become an 'art form' in the hands of 'white male trash' that were imperialising the Territory under Commonwealth control.¹¹ Trade unions and left wing pastoral workers together with writers like Hill, Xavier Herbert and very much later John Mulvaney, explained the nature of the Australian peripheral culture 'of the white barbarians', including those representing government bureaucracies.¹² Exercising less constraint than most were the likes of Cecil Cook and his regional protectors, in dealing with natives and the 'half-caste problem'. Dr Cook was a strong supporter of close management of 'The Territory Government's half-caste problem'.

Cook's ideology on race resembles race theories where: a study of human improvement, in all aspects [was to be] by genetic means. Its goal is to increase the proportion of persons with better than average genetic endowment. It draws from psychology for analysis of the part played by differences in heredity and environment in the development of personality, intelligence and character; from medicine and medical genetics for information on hereditary defects and susceptibility to diseases; and from demography, for rates of births and deaths, the mating habits, and the social and physical factors that determine the relative increase or decline of persons with different characteristics.¹³

Central to these ideas was the notion that the medical profession, to which Dr Cecil Cook belonged, was highly influenced by the point of view of deterministic perfection that could be achieved through social engineering as well as

10 'List of inmates; including Eileen Briscoe', CRS A659, 1939/1/996, folios 403-405, NAA, Canberra.

11 Markus 1990: 37-49.

12 '...Reported Murder of in NT', CRS A1, 1936/2763, NAA, Canberra. See also 'A.X. Herbert, Appt Dispenser Dresser NA' CRS A1, 1937/1718, NAA, Canberra. Herbert worked for Cook but was a chronicler of what went on both in and out of Darwin. See also Mulvaney and Calaby 1985: 169-380.

13 The New Encyclopaedia Britannica 1976: 1023-1026.

economically managed control. These ideologies, theories and practices contained all the underpinnings of 'eugenics'. Bleakley wrote, long after he retired, that a plan was devised to launch a great public movement in Queensland, 'for the purpose of arousing wider interest in the welfare of Aborigines'.¹⁴ A meeting at the Queensland University, opened by the Governor of Queensland, proposed a set of political demands built on 'segregation, religion, uniform policy, social tuition for industrial training' and 'self-dependence'. Laws were to be based on 'native' culture, psychology, health, discipline and protection from social vices. Equally, there were suggested laws to control marriage, morals, property and succession of any possessions. These proposals went much deeper than focusing only on gaining the approval of the upper classes; agreement too was sought from the Protestant church and government alike. It was argued that the moral force was not 'racially-based' but focused on post-war labour demands. The union movement argued for inclusion of Aborigines into general wage fixing arrangements, but pastoralists wanted slave labour, rejecting outright notions of paid Aboriginal labour, knowing the *Aboriginal Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act 1897* (Qld) already provided subsidies for 'black segregated labour'.

Supervisors of the half-caste institutions were actively involved in implementing these policies. Ida Standley was the first teacher supervisor at the Jay Creek Bungalow, followed by Mr and Mrs Thorne as a temporary husband and wife team. They soon left and were followed by a Mr and Mrs Freeman.¹⁵ When Freeman arrived my mother was 14 and undergoing medical treatment for an un-stated ailment. Later in life she related a story to me about when she had finished her training and was first employed as a day labour domestic for white women in Alice Springs. A bus would pick up the young girls in the morning and return them at the end of a day's work. They sometime went to the film shows in town but were forced to sit in the front of the open air theatre for fear they might copulate with white men while the lights were turned off! Sometimes the bus driver would fraternise with one or two of the young women and delay returning them to the Jay.¹⁶ She said that all the white people, including those passing through Alice en route to Darwin, believed the Aboriginal women and girls were consorting and accused the half-caste girls, in particular, of being prostitutes.

Most supervisors were judged for the positions on their attachments to Christian institutions or on the community standing from which they came. No training at this time was required nor asked for. Mr Freeman fitted this pattern well

¹⁴ Bleakley 1961.

¹⁵ Smith J 1999.

¹⁶ Pers comm with Eileen Briscoe 1972 about her memories of Jay Creek and Freeman's tenure.

because he had no personal or professional knowledge of Aborigines; yet he set himself up as an expert. His reports reveal his own assumptions on Aborigines. He wrote that the:

half-caste Aboriginal problem of Central Australia [is different to other places]. Aborigines differ in customs, physique and mentality from ... other parts [of Australia]. The girls under the care and guidance of the matron [received] a thorough training in all domestic duties, and when they leave the Institution are competent in all branches of house work, cooking, (plain) bread making etc., besides being able to make their own clothing, knitting and fancy work. The boys are in addition to schooling being trained, as far as possible to fit them for work on stations.¹⁷

Freeman, therefore, knew exactly in what direction assimilation was heading, as if Dr Cook had spoken directly to him. Neither he nor Dr Cook were able to satisfy the baying press while Ernestine Hill, however, was directing her attention at the latter.

Hill sensed what managing race fertility involved and was also aware of 'white Australia's fear-mongering', directing questions at Dr Cook in order to tell readers that there would be no 'American Negroid' problem in Australia. Politics, capital and democracy would never be put in the hands of 'throw-backs', half-castes, quadroons, octoroons and possessors of 'atavistic tendencies'. The Australian native would disappear after six generations, thus obliterating the 'half-caste problem'. There would be managed breeding between white men and half-caste women, under strict supervision, as she put it, by selecting girls from 'the Darwin Compound and mission stations provided that they are in a position to adequately maintain themselves and their children'.¹⁸

Deep down this economic thinking provided a rationale for capitalism, but not a justification for free or taxpayer-funded support to groups or individuals. If people could not pay for the 'services' they took from the state, then somebody else would! Critics such as Hill painted a picture of incest, miscegenation, prostitution, over-population and Mendelian race theory where the 'Australian native [was] the most easily assimilated race on earth, physically [and] mentally'. But breeding with Asiatics was 'not desirable [and the] quickest way out' was 'to breed [them] white'. This practice and debate went on into the late 1920s, both within white society and inside the political arena as a renovated 'Old Telegraph Station' was about to be populated by the inmates from Jay Creek.¹⁹

17 'Freeman's Report, 26 March 1932', CRS A659, 1939/1/996, folios 417-424, NAA, Canberra.

18 Hill 1933.

19 Hill 1933 (Hill described 'The Old Telegraph Station' as a 'Half-caste Institutional Compound' 15 kilometres out of town to the west).

These were the conditions faced by Aborigines of mixed descent when Father Percy Smith arrived on the scene. Different creeds had been arguing the right to give religious instruction to inmates of the 'Native Institutions' since the early 1920s. But nothing happened until Reverend Davies sent his report to the Adelaide Advertiser in July of 1929. Following this the Presbyterian as well as the Baptist Churches began baptising half-caste children in the camps around Alice Springs, at the same time raising the half-caste question with the Australian Board of Missions. The Church of England Bishop of Willochra, the Right Reverend Dr R Thomas wrote to Parliament following Davies' letter and soon after a cleric was despatched. By 1932 all except Roman Catholics, who had a mission at Arltunga and one between what was later called Anzac Hill and Middle Park, attended religious instruction according to Freeman's report of May 1932. The Reverend Percival McDonald Smith (Father or Percy Smith as he became known to Aboriginal people) arrived as the permanent curate whose role was to service and baptise children and their siblings.²⁰

Records reveal that Cook wanted secular 'Native Institutions' but from the late 1920s the Church and the media forced the issue. John Smith, Father Smith's son, wrote that when his father arrived in 1933:

There were over one hundred children at the 'Bungalow', of whom eighty were Anglicans, so he had a pastoral responsibility to them. Father [Smith] wasn't impressed with the conditions of the Old Telegraph station site.²¹

Father Smith had one focus and that was the proselytisation of half-castes. In this way he differed from the wider Australian missionary policies, characterised by the historian Markus in this way:

The direct involvement of the Churches with Aborigines can be said to have changed from next to nothing at the turn of the century to a little by the 1930s. Of funds collected for missionary work, only a small percentage was spent in Australia: the heathen in Asia and other parts of the world were accorded a higher priority. While there was an expansion of missionary activities in the [Northern Territory], there was no major commitment by any religious denomination, and the few missionaries were starved of funds.²²

20 Fraser 1993. See 'Half-Caste Institution', CRS A1, 1936/9959, NAA, Canberra; Smith J 1999.

21 Smith J 1999: 31-51.

22 Markus 1990: 68.

This theme of the parsimonious nature of governments and religion is one that drove the history of the politics of European prejudice, and into which Father Smith was engulfed.²³

Nevertheless, Father Smith persisted and formed his own ideas about Aboriginal affairs, like most white people who came to the Territory. He was born in Woolloongabba, Brisbane, on 29 March 1903 to an English-Irish migrant family. He came to the Church of England priesthood through the Brotherhood of St Paul and the 'the Bush Brotherhood', when he became a deacon stationed in Charleville, western Queensland in 1926. However, his health was weakened by a chest infection, possibly tuberculosis, and he was not ordained until 1927. His colleagues criticised the proposed ordination because they maintained that Father Smith was not a scholar and did not have a complex theological degree. Instead Father Smith was privately ordained for his other qualities such as devotion, humility, undemonstrativeness and a shunning of 'grand occasions, preferring working quietly and resolutely'.²⁴ Sometimes, as history shows, working in this way can leave the individual unexamined. Father Smith could also be thought of as a 'convert' with an understanding of existential thought, and being a 'people's person' with a stress on mending people's character and concreteness of life. However, he lacked a deeper knowledge of Biblical scholarship, Latin, Greek and Hebrew; the roots of the Christian text.

His great strength was that he was able to listen to people's woes and relate them to Paul's conversion on 'the road to Damascus' which could be seen in the everyday lives of people. In outback Australia these assumptions became real life, as other writers have shown where people had to cope with isolation, marriage break-up, the effects of drought and flooding rains, cyclones and social dislocation. John Smith later revealed that his father was an understanding man who related to those with whom he came in contact. The sociologist Berger's comments are appropriate to Father Smith:

Most of us do not set out deliberately to paint a grand portrait of ourselves. Rather we stumble like drunkards over the sprawling canvas of our self-conception, throwing a little paint here, erasing some lines there, and never really stopping to obtain a view of the likeness we have produced. In other words, we might accept the existentialist notion that we create ourselves if we add the observation that most of this creation occurs haphazardly and at best in half-awareness.²⁵

Father Smith sensed the 'bad faith' propagated by government as soon as he set eyes on the institutionalised half-caste children at both Jay Creek and later as

23 Rowley 1971b: 109-113.

24 Smith J 1999: 9.

25 Berger 1963: 75.

their numbers grew at 'The Bungalow Telegraph Station'. He would have heard the words of Jesus saying: 'Come unto me all you that travail and are heavy laden and I will refresh you' in his mind's eye, and saw both the idea of 'freeing' the children from the shackles of the government as well as putting them through baptism and then onto 'confirmation'. He wrote to Cook saying that some half-castes were baptised and he wanted contact with them. My mother told me that she was baptised at the rear of the Stuart Arms Hotel by his predecessor. She first met Father Smith in 1933.

Father Smith arrived in 1933 at the half-caste institution and by 1938 had baptised and confirmed a considerable number of the children; and had a concrete plan forming in his mind. Three things weighed heavily on him. One was the recent charging of the superintendent for sexual harassment of Aboriginal females.²⁶ Another was the racist language used by white people in Alice Springs when they were speaking about Aborigines – as Smith indicated to his son John.²⁷ And, finally, education as understood by government he thought farcical.²⁸

Policy formation under Dr Cook was a high priority. Policy practice was lax, however, because bureaucrats could not articulate what they wanted and were unable to direct parliament toward a firm solution. One big drawback was that administrative staff from South Australia, such as teachers, found that living and class room conditions affected their health and were not helped by the racism of townfolk of Alice Springs. Local white people along with transport and rail travellers looked on Aborigines and half-caste children with contempt, undermining the confidence of southern teachers working with the children. Attitudes ranged from, 'that they should be sent back out bush' to the idea that 'the government should not be spending money on educating them'.²⁹

This upset Father Smith, the existentialist Christian. What looked like an oxymoron was that somewhere Father Smith had read, not just about how 'faith' in God works, but that there was another side to those ideas and that was 'bad faith'. To him this idea of 'bad faith' permeated everything about what was happening in Alice Springs. Governments oppressed half-castes and deprived them of the best circumstances that humanism could muster including the prospect of 'freedom'. Through his Christian theology Father Smith believed that he understood the dilemma and difficult decisions that had to be made about these children. Involved in this process was the choice of whether to remove them from familiar surroundings to live in alienating church homes, or leaving them to run wild and free in the township of Alice Springs and more than likely, in wartime, to be arrested by police or soldiers. To Father Smith, the

26 Smith J 1999: 50.

27 Smith J 1999: 51.

28 Smith J 1999: 50.

29 Smith J 1999: 51.

children appeared most free when they were taken away from the institution and demonstrated their capacity to hunt animals and gather other food they knew about and enjoyed. Father Smith sensed when he first saw them at Jay Creek that they were desperately unhappy, but he felt a change would occur when his brand of Christianity was applied.³⁰

Of course, it was difficult for Father Smith to see or accept that he was replacing one form of constraint with another. Father Smith could not see that these children's escape was in fact an escape from an identity of which government wanted conformity. He recognised the oppressiveness but had no nature to bring it down. Father Smith, according to his son John, read and understood theories of religion and existentialism, and what became an anthropological theory of the early twentieth century – freedom was something that only God could bestow, and 'bad faith' was something that had to be endured.³¹

In the years between 1938 and 1942 Father Smith experienced successes and failures as his personal solutions of the half-caste problem matured. Early on in this period one of the older boys, Joe Croft, was sent down from the Anglican depot at Borroloola to Alice Springs where the half-caste institution now offered up to grade three primary school classes. Joe had already received a very basic education in Borroloola, and had shown some aptitude for studying at higher grades when transferred to Alice Springs. Because of this success a school teacher, Walter Boehm, along with Father Smith, tutored and encouraged Joe to sit for the South Australian Junior Certificate.³² If Joe passed this test he could attend secondary school: but where? Through this philosophical crack Father Smith crawled as his ideas fermented into obliterating 'the half-caste problem'.

Joe Croft's background is interesting and relevant. His mother Nancy Croft contracted leprosy and was quarantined at the Borroloola ration depot. When Joe's mother was transported to the leprosarium at Mud Island he was cared for at the small but over crowded Anglican ration depot. Leprosy between the wars had become endemic and grew out of the nineteenth century labour shortage. A panicking colonial government imported a large Chinese labour workforce which was later attributed with introducing the disease into Aboriginal communities. Again, one of the reasons leprosy spread so quickly was that the Chinese who came to work in the Territory mining industry came without their womenfolk. This caused a glut of males who either developed casual sexual relations with Aboriginal females or took them as sexual partners. The Territory administration forced the Church to take its lepers back to Borroloola when the leprosy epidemics occurred in the late-1920s and 1930s. In a chaotic

30 Smith J 1999: 54.

31 Jaspers 1932: vols 1-2. See also Kierkegaard 1976[1936]: 73-79; Berger 1963: 163-164.

32 Smith J 1999: 54-56.

situation good people, driven by religious text, chose solutions outside the rule of law. But the priests had one priority, and that was to lessen the chance of the children being infected; most of the children were moved to Queensland. Joe, however, was one child who was sent south to the Bungalow in Alice Springs by the Anglicans; possibly because he had reached grade three at Borroloola. Administrator Cook complimented these strategies allowing Joe to move to the Old Telegraph Station. Cook was aware that with the aid of special tutoring, as mentioned above, Joe could and did successfully complete his junior certificate examination. As a mentor, Father Smith used the opportunity to then have Joe admitted to the prestigious College of All Souls Anglican boarding school at Charters Towers. Following this Joe entered the Queensland University to begin a degree in engineering in 1942. Joe's success validated Father Smith's idea that if you removed half-castes from their circumstance of poverty and degradation they would prosper. This success gave Father Smith sufficient evidence to convince both the Anglican Church and the Department of Native Affairs in Darwin that it was fulfilment of the idea that the half-caste problem could be solved.³³ Altruism comes in various forms and in Father Smith his was a genuine philanthropy, but Christianity can impose a life-long commitment and obligation if wrongly taking peoples trust in hand. This was Father Smith's problem but again he assumed that he had an answer where none previously existed.

But as the war gathered pace Father Smith's patience with government wore thin as bureaucracy overburdened theology. Authority and wartime chaos decided the fate of a number of half-caste boys, and briefly the half-caste 'problem' appeared to have a solution. Digressing slightly, by 1944-45 a number of things spurred Father Smith on to rethink his earlier ideas. First of all the war forced all Native Institutions in the Northern Territory to be closed except perhaps those run by zealots such as the Roman Catholic, the Lutheran and the Presbyterian Churches. The Catholics had two missions in Alice Springs: one was at Charles Creek; the other was at Arltunga, a town resulting from the gold rush late in the previous century. The Presbyterians created a hostel in Alice Springs where, in their view, the half-caste 'waifs' and 'strays' could be collected up in the style of Ida Standley's and Sergeant Stott's practice, thereby creating another 'Bungalow'. In an act of near-lunacy following the threat of Japanese invasion, the Presbyterians gathered up their camp children and took them to Croker Island, closer to the enemy lines. When the Department of Native Affairs evacuated many of the half-castes southwards, the Roman Catholic nuns moved their flock into the vacant buildings of the Old Telegraph Station. Bureaucracy had provided a barrier to Christian work but they soon adopted 'direct action'; pushing aside 'the rule of Law' that was replaced by 'martial

³³ Smith J 1999: 53-56.

law'. This move benefited the townsfolk of Alice Springs because labour was scarce and Australian and American soldiers were arriving in growing numbers. In order not to offend white American sensibilities townsfolk surmised that 'full-bloods' could be kept out of town. However, there was still the 'night-soil' to attend to and the menial jobs like cleaning and domestic work where labour was needed; military planning allocated these tasks to those of full descent. On the other hand, many of the half-castes filled the jobs close to white townsfolk and military personnel. The more sought-after tasks were in the military kitchens where waste foods and offal were prized. In the middle of this chaos were the children of a number of women of mixed Aboriginal and other descent. Among these women were Hetti Perkins and her sister Mary Bray, then living at Deep Well Station south of Alice Springs with her husband Billy Bray and a number of their children. Among those who remained in town were Melba Palmer, Edie Espie and Maggie Smith and many more working girls. There were also a number of women from the Tilmouth family, and descendants of Afghan and other Asian cameleers, and mine workers. Some of these people were attached to the Nayda, Satour, Sultan, Furber, Ah Chee, Ah Fat, Ah Kit, Hong and Ah Mat families. These chaotic circumstances created situations in which many of the younger and older women were swept up in employment for the American and Australian armies while the children were left to their own devices. These events worked against Aboriginal families and favoured Father Smith's ideas.

Although the military began conscripting Aborigines³⁴ to some extent in work gangs there was in general only one form of employment; that was in the pastoral industry for men and domestic duties for women. And the *Aboriginals Ordinance 1918* (Cth) appeared to fall into limbo. Coming from a world of drastic economic deprivation to one of total freedom was traumatic for Aborigines. It created too much freedom, too much money, too much food, which resulted in many of the children of half-caste families being left without adult care. Their mothers were working for higher wages and living in total freedom in military huts which were used as billets or tin shacks in 'Rainbow Town'. They worked unrestricted hours with little or no supervision. This work regime resulted in the women's lives being turned upside down and out of control. The younger children were left to run rampant around the township of Alice Springs, while their adolescent sons were taken north to work in military gangs and their daughters removed to work in gangs in military kitchens or as domestics.

Many of the boys who stayed were dragooned into military work camps, dressed as soldiers, fed by the military, billeted in army tents, looking to the entire world like soldiers. Martial law allowed the military to treat them as unskilled labour; on low pay and to be shifted anywhere between Darwin and Adelaide. Then of course there was stock work for the very young. Sometimes they

34 Berndt and Berndt 1987.

worked for their Aboriginal fathers as contract musterers or for nothing with white pastoralists. This was a time when there were no regulations and nobody to monitor what was going on. If stock work was unavailable fettling on the rail-lines helped provide local employment. Afghan camel trains by this time had been partly superseded by the railway that required skilled labour. Camels, however, remained the beast of burden in out of the way places and transport routes not serviced by rail.

For the young, in town, petty larceny and trafficking of sorts, such as fetching and carrying kept them busy. This is where Aboriginal children often began to turn to crime and they now had two types of police to evade. The police force was increased 300 per cent by the military police, who had in turn little appreciation of the children's circumstances and had limited scope to help. In their defence the job was made more complex because troop trains now passed through Alice Springs, trebling the population. Under these conditions Aboriginal children, military drunks and prostitutes filled the lock-ups. The children were often left to run wild while their mothers were working long hours. In addition to this added freedom there was the problem of tougher bush kids, such as John Palmer from Bond Springs and Malcolm Cooper from the Hermannsburg Malbunka family, coming into town and picking fights with the locals. Kids from Tin Town, or Rainbow Town in Alice Springs would attack the likes of Charlie Perkins as a Bungalow depot boy. Charlie was bullied by these bigger, tougher and better fighters and this was to have a lasting effect on him. Father Smith was concerned that some of the younger boys were getting detained by the military and local police, and as a way of combating this unruly behaviour, he started up a home for boys called St John's Hostel. It was from this establishment that Father Smith later arranged to take the boys to Adelaide, if their mothers agreed, because there were too many children to be accommodated at the public school.

These were admirable ideas but lacked much thought for the future. Some years earlier Father Smith had met a like-minded person in Dr Charles Duguid. Duguid, a Scottish migrant and the creator of the Ernabella Mission, was then in medical practice in North Terrace, Adelaide. Drawing on his experience of Christianising bush people, Duguid had carried out a number of surveys in the Pitjantjatjara lands in the south and south-west of the Territory during the 1920s and 1930s. He had already created an orphanage at Oodnadatta where white pastoralists could dispose of their unwanted mixed blood children or be taken directly from their camp mothers. Praise for Father Smith's Christian ministry came very easy to Duguid: they were both unable to see any hope in the way white people and government were treating half-caste children; besides they had the newspapers on their side to condemn current adolescent control practices. But changing laws was not the business of the Church.

These two men channelled their criticism mostly through Christian publications that only the faithful read.³⁵ Both Smith and Duguid focused their attention on pointing out the appalling outcomes of government actions.³⁶ They agreed that Christian care and teaching appeared to be better than the plans and programs provided by white Alice Springs townsfolk of earlier times such as Sergeant Stott, Ida Standley and more recently, Dr Cook. Smith and Duguid believed that the children were in the hands of unscrupulous white people, but that they 'could be trained to be useful and respectable citizens, if given a chance'.³⁷

Father Smith's son John wrote later that he believed his father was a man of action and word.³⁸ In 1941 Father Smith utilised St John's Hostel on land attached to his rectory, to further develop his plans for half-caste children. With martial law and the Ordinances suspended he put into practice his actions and his word. The first intake of Aboriginal boys – Noel Hampton, John Palmer, William Espie, Malcolm Cooper and Charles Perkins lived in Father Smith's rectory. These boys will feature throughout this memoir. John Smith wrote the following:

At various times during the period 1942 to 1944 the mothers of the ... boys talked to [him] about the possibility of their respective sons having the opportunity to reside at St John's Hostel. With the result being that in each case they were accepted and appropriate financial and settling in arrangements were made. It was an arrangement based on trust and respect that would lead to better education chances being made available to Aboriginal children.³⁹

These were fine words but it has to be remembered that this process began with an offer that was made on trust and where no records were kept. In hindsight assimilation was one aspect of the new idea and the other was Christianisation in the false hope that the 'half-caste problem' would disappear. The hope may have been that most of the boys would be spirited off to Adelaide before the end of the European War, and that many would never return.

Doubt in the minds of governments, Australian society and the churches over 'racial theory' and the success of religious moral action left the whole policy in a vacuum. The government was never sure whether their protection policies referred to bush people or half-castes. Bureaucrats and society in general were unsure whether to apply 'the rule of Law' or change the policy from general protection for either an undefinable Aboriginal population or create a new

35 Duguid 1963.

36 Smith J 1999: 62-63.

37 Smith J 1999: 63-64.

38 Smith J 1999: 65.

39 Smith J 1999: 65.

policy dubbed 'assimilation'. Australians, through the eyes of the press and a confused government, opted for a 'head in the sand' approach and left welfare to anyone who showed a modicum of moral action. Father Smith, operating on behalf of the Church did so in the belief his moral action was in good faith but history may not validate that perspective. Some believe that he took on a thankless task. I will leave others to ponder the question as to whether the boys who were taken to St Francis House were better off than those left behind in Alice Springs. But to answer this question there is much more to this, my story!