

Chapter 13

The 1990s and beyond

The 1990s brought with it the joy of our first grandchild, Mitchell James Taylor-Briscoe. Mitchell was born on 4 October 1993, a seven pound plus baby with big blue eyes and a beautiful face. He was and still is the pride and joy of us all, including his proud parents Aaron and partner Meredith Taylor. Meredith was born in Melbourne where she spent her early childhood years; during which time her father was a fireman with the Metropolitan Fire Brigade. They later moved as a family to rural Victoria, where her mother established, and became Principal of a school for handicapped children.

However, while as a family we were rejoicing in the birth of Mitchell I was still grappling with academia. Writing a thesis is never an easy task however you come to it. For me it was no different, except that I was driven by fear of failure. Some very clever students falter and are overwhelmed when confronted with big works such as a Master or Doctoral thesis and fail to complete their challenges. Others of lesser innate capabilities make things easier by building on their undergraduate or lower degrees as they progress. By the time students get to the final hurdle they have a lot of experience and material to draw on. My capacities fall somewhere between these two approaches. As Norma always comments, my ability to keep going and overcome whatever hurdles that get in my way are my greatest assets. My other more concrete assets were my lengthy involvement in the politics of Aboriginal Affairs which I could draw on. With these two attributes I strode forward to do something that few others have the privilege to achieve.

Father Smith's dream of integrating us into Australian society was unachievable, in spite of the respect many of the children might have had for him, given the meagre support raised from government and the religious community. They both still have much to answer for! Decades later, Aboriginal peoples' protests were something different to Father Smith's dream. The reality was that they wanted radical political change rather than the 'protestant ethic'. The educational journey that I began in 1942 contained all these characteristics. Eventually the journey had taken me to the Research School of Social Sciences at the Australian National University, where I became engaged in my own research and taught students. When I began my doctoral studies I followed the general procedure for students in the history program which is to read, plan and think about their topics; I followed this pattern to a certain extent but in the end I came more or less to my topic by accident. I had written an article for the Oxford University history journal *History Workshop* about the Aboriginal population

and identity. The article was published and crystallised in my mind the idea of a thesis on the way institutionalisation and employment had shaped Aboriginal identity. It appealed to me and it got the tick from most people I spoke to, who thought it would be a good historical project. Historians choose their subjects in the way they want to reconstruct the past, but there are particular schools of thought that influence their view of the world. With my racial and employment background I favoured what I thought was a 'leftist' approach. I mistakenly thought that being a doctoral student I had total freedom!

While still thinking and mulling over my topic the Aboriginal poet Kevin Gilbert died. I went to his wake on the site of the Aboriginal Embassy, and then returned to my room in the history program much affected by what I had experienced at the Embassy site. Standing there too I had seen Nugget Coombs and other whites in the front row hogging the limelight. Not that I wanted to take their places, but it looked bizarre. I had known Gilbert from the days of Aboriginal protest in Sydney in the late 1960s. My thinking turned to his early background, probably because it tied in with my proposed writing of a doctoral thesis on Aboriginal employment in rural areas of Australia. This coupled with my enduring *idée fixe* of getting Aboriginal biographies on the radar of academia; informed scholarly biographies not glossy ones with a sense of journalism! I have been criticised for critically writing about a recently deceased person but find this a rather incipient and hollow argument in the light of continued public attacks on the reputation of the historian Professor Manning Clark.¹ Not only has his monumental work been savaged but very intimate details of his private life have been exposed in newspapers, including his relationships with others who are still living. Aboriginal biographies need to be written in the context of what happened, not treated as a protected species where only the noble are written about for publicity purposes rather for inclusion in historic text. In short I used the press coverage of Gilbert's death and obituaries, which I thought were shallow, to critique how white society handles Aboriginal biography.² Few others could appreciate the point I had made and so I was damned out of context. Since then, not necessarily because of my work, changes have been made in this area both by the Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, incidentally where the most trenchant criticism originated, and by the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*. The attacks on my critique of Gilbert I let go through to the keeper and focused instead on my studies.

Life took its own sweet turn! Each Friday afternoon history scholars from the research school take a casual walk across the well-groomed lawns of the university to the History Program's weekly seminar. The seminar was normally given by either students, staffers from the department or visiting fellows. As I

1 MacIntyre and Clark 2003: 61-67.

2 Briscoe 1994: 13-31.

left the building I bumped into Professors Barrymore Smith and Ken Inglis who were on their way to the same presentation. Ken asked me: 'Have you decided on a topic for your thesis?' I said: 'Yes, I'd like to study Aboriginal employment in rural Australia.' Ken quickly responded with: 'You can't study that because there is nobody to supervise you.' I went weak at the knees and was silent for a moment believing in my despair that they would perhaps have liked to see me leave the department altogether. I waited for a moment or two and said in quick response, 'Well, my second option is Aboriginal health. Barry, [as most people called Professor Smith] can be my supervisor.' Before they could say no, I said I would like that very much.

Barry Smith was an expert on health and had written extensively on the subject. His Cambridge thesis was on tuberculosis. He had been one of the first post-war Melbourne University students to study at such a prestigious institution. Barry's *magnum opus* was a published work called *The People's Health*, in which he outlined the history of tuberculosis in humans in Britain. The following Monday, in his frighteningly boisterous manner, he knocked loudly on my door, stuck his head around the door and boomed, 'I want a 10,000 word dissertation on your plans containing a time table, research costs, a half page synopsis on your thesis proposition together with your primary and secondary source materials!' I thought that was all as I shuddered but he returned a few seconds later to say, 'I also need to know who your other supervisors will be.' My knees went weak again!

The History Department head in the Research School is rotated on a regular basis and at this particular time it was the turn of Dr Paul Bourke, who had just returned from America. Paul, who knew Barry well from Melbourne University, encouraged me to stay with him because he had a great record of success. I took his advice. Others who I had talked to about my work worried that Barry and I would not get on, but the relationship blossomed. Although Barry was gruff he was invariably right and honest in his appraisal. He knew a lot about protecting his students and also encouraged visiting Cambridge and American scholars to talk to students about their approaches, thesis content and titles. At the time the thesis title seemed very unimportant to me but Barry persisted in that it gave other scholars instant understanding of what a student was doing. This issue came up later when Professor Jay Winter, a renowned Cambridge scholar of Jewish background, asked me at my first seminar the title of my thesis. I was unable to give him an answer mainly because I was focusing on convincing the audience that Aboriginal health was a legitimate subject.

But the discussion about the title was not over. It was traditional for seminar givers in the history program to be taken to lunch at University House, 300 metres from the Chancellery lecture room. On this day Jay culled me out from the moving crowd and focused on my title. As we moved along he said, 'It is the

events about the past and the people that can pull your work together. Health itself hides the history.' He went on to say, 'But, the story is about how people organise health, how people get sick, what is done about them, together with some of the contradictions you have already presented to us here today. You have a great project dealing with many things other than health, so what do you think of the idea of "Aspects of Aboriginal health: 1900 to 1940?"' Right then I thought the idea most helpful and I warmed more to the suggestion as time went on. Most students, Jay indicated, struggled with these problems and I was no different. After that run-in I always acted on Barry's advice.

By the beginning of 1993 I had pared down my topic to study disease patterns affecting Aborigines. I wanted to investigate how bureaucratic structures in the Australian colonies dealt with emerging patterns of health and how diseases themselves 'have a life of their own'. A major part of the thesis would examine Aboriginal epistemological ideas about sickness and wellness. Finally, I wanted to investigate how traditional Aboriginal and European health systems dealt with the historical events they created. Aboriginal societies used memory, superstition and the power of spontaneous thought coming from secret society to explain ill health, whereas for Europeans health has been built on science and ideology. Europeans, like Aboriginal health ideology, kept patients deliberately ignorant as a means of control. All this I passed across Barry Smith. At the traditional morning teas I would make sure that I sat next to Barry and discuss most of my ideas with him. Barry wanted to have a very clear notion of my proposition: preferably as compact as one sentence, which I gave him. He was happy with what I had done and he was interested in an atavistic approach to try, if the sources existed, to get inside Aboriginal healers' heads, and I did that through the sources of Daisy Bates, Walter Roths and JHL Cumpston.

Daisy Bates had spent a very long time collecting Noogali and Bibulman languages as well as compiling data on what Aboriginal healers knew about health, diseases and healing. Roth, in Queensland, collected data on sickness, diseases and Aboriginal pre-contact actions in dealing with the sick. Finally, Cumpston began collecting data on Aboriginal illness and wellness when he was appointed head of Customs in the Commonwealth government from as early as the first decade of Federation. Barry himself had also taken a keen interest in dangerous pathogens associated with diseases like tuberculosis, influenza and leprosy and together we produced a sound 10,000-word document as a first step to compiling the first draft of the thesis some time later.

Barry advised me that one of my first tasks was to establish an estimate of the Aboriginal population in my study areas of Queensland and Western Australia in the period from 1900 to 1940 as a determinant of rates of illness and wellness. This proved to be a much harder task than first imagined. Since Federation Aborigines had been excluded from published census counts and it was only

through sheer persistence researching Commonwealth archive material, and other original sources, that I came across a mother lode of information in the form of previously unpublished yearly Aboriginal counts. These censuses were carried out from 1921 until the Second World War.

Aborigines' knowledge of health rested mostly on feelings, such as the nature of body heat, superstition and magic. These aspects of Aborigines' knowledge are still powerful, and are not far removed from what the British knew throughout the nineteenth century when little was known of infection and the biology and virology of diseases. However, there were important differences: the colonists brought with them the knowledge of science together with a broad understanding of diseases and organised care regimes while Aborigines had none of these advantages. Smallpox, venereal diseases and a large range of social infections soon began to take effect on an unsuspecting Aboriginal population. Horrendous pathogens such as tuberculosis were endemic along with other diseases like leprosy, coupled with parasitic diseases caused by living in one place too long. And then of course there was the loss of cultural beliefs and practices, along with contaminated food and drinking sources, all of which amounted to British imperial conquest.

Aborigines were concentrated into service depots, reserves and managed missions for convenience, while all the time colonial administrations blundered through on the assumption that they were invited guests rather than an invading force. By the 1901 Federation of colonies any hope of an evenly balanced relationship had evaporated, and in the main Aborigines were left out of the narrative. As a result we had no names, no characters, no lives; they were shadowy figures. This is what I wrote about.³

Somewhere in the maze of writing up my thesis Norma decided it was time to move again! Perhaps that statement is a little harsh since the move came about in part because the family decided that I was getting too old to ride a 1,100cc motorbike. This threw up the problem that we only had one car; Norma had to get to work and I had to get to the uni. The alternatives were buy another car or move closer to the university. We chose the latter. Again we embarked on the option of an auction when we saw a Canberra red brick house in O'Connor (an inner suburb) that appealed to us. The house was ideally located a 15 minute walk from the university and also was much closer to Norma's work in the city. We moved in during the spring of 1995. The O'Connor house became a favourite with both of us, in part because of its central location, and in part because of its beautiful leafy garden and oak tree lined street.

3 Briscoe 2004.

The O'Connor house also became memorable because not long after moving in Mitchell started school, and we began picking him up in the afternoons. It was a time when we developed a close relationship with him, which became very special to both his grandparents. From the start I would play winter rugby and summer cricket in the back garden with him. As he grew older it became quite competitive at times and we both loved it! Even as a young boy I could see his sporting potential, particularly in cricket, and I determined from then on to coach him whenever the opportunity presented itself. For me these times spent with Mitchell were a welcome distraction from academia.

I completed my thesis in mid-1996 and my PhD degree was conferred in 1997. This turned out to be a family double in that Norma's degree was also conferred at the same time. Norma had started a degree part-time in the late 1980s. She has a very practical side to her nature and chose subjects that would enhance her work opportunities. She majored in political science, applied statistics and population studies. She graduated with a first class honours degree and we as a family are immensely proud of her achievement. Her thesis analysed sex differential trends in infant mortality from 1964 to 1993. A complex study but one that was made easier because she built on her undergraduate studies as well as her work experience in the field of data analysis at the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare and the Australian Bureau of Statistics. It proved to be a lovely day with our now grown-up children, my brother Sam and all their partners there at the graduating ceremonies to wish us both well. I stayed on in the History Program to prepare for a post-doctoral project. My interest in historical demography had intensified and I conceived the idea of a gathering of international and Australian scholars interested in Aboriginal historical demography. My good friend and colleague Len Smith and I called for papers from those interested in the field. The conference was held in the student meeting room at the Jabal Aboriginal student centre where Neville Perkins, in his role as Director of Indigenous Students at the university, opened the conference in December of 1999.

I have a soft spot for Neville, not only because we are related, but because I have known him since he was a baby. He spent his early years being cared for by his mother May, Charlie's sister, and his grandmother Hettie during the time my mother lived with them at the cottages, known as Rainbow Town, near Heavitree Gap. My lasting memory of Neville is of him and my brother Sam swimming in a bog hole on the road in front of Hettie's place after a rainstorm. When I next saw him he was in a grey Newington College suit at Charlie's Bondi unit on my return to Australia in 1964. Years later a 'grown-up' Neville played guitar with Max Silver and Tommy Williams in the 'Black Lace' band at the Foundation on Friday nights. Neville showed early potential leadership as a member of the University of Sydney student body. He gave encouragement to the Aboriginal

students campaigning for funds to create the Aboriginal Legal Service, as well as the Land Rights campaign and later raising funds for the Aboriginal Medical Service, which he gladly supported. As the FCAATSI protests intensified Neville was both a delegate and a leading ideas man, utilising his study of Australian government and law. In the early 1970s, Neville returned to the Territory where he was involved in the Australian Labor Party, working feverishly to enrol as many Aboriginal people as possible. It was during this time that he and I came together to create the Central Australian Aboriginal Congress and medical service, later expanded to Papunya, the Pitja Pitja lands and Urapuntja (Utopia). In his role as both Congress director and delegate for Stuart he was a powerful advocate for Aboriginal political representation. He was elected to the Northern Territory House of Representatives and led the Labor Party in opposition. Neville came to Canberra in 1994; I encouraged him to apply for the position as the Director of the Jabal Aboriginal Student Centre. While there Neville and I were successful in creating a greater focus on Aboriginal scholarship which ultimately led to a review of the Australian National University's Aboriginal education under Professor Peter Read.

At the conference I was keen to raise issues that stimulated scholars in the study of ethno-archaeological and Aboriginal pre-contact populations. Historical and local questions were raised by the late Dr Elspeth Young in her paper on alternative approaches to understanding population. Sad to say, Elspeth was one of two presenters at the conference who have since died. The other was Professor Alan Gray who came from Japan to speak on an underutilised topic, 'The future history of Aboriginal families'. Alan Gray died relatively young and his passing was a great loss both as a friend and colleague. I first met Alan when we worked as public servants in the Department of Aboriginal Affairs in the late 1970s. He later became one of my early thesis supervisors before leaving to teach in India and Japan. Over the years he was known and liked by many Aborigines who had a very high regard for both him and his work. Alan believed that, 'statisticians are the fabricators of reality but do so within the ideologies of society'. Like Alan Gray, Elspeth had a long struggle with cancer and just as it seemed that she had beaten the tumour she had a relapse and succumbed, leaving behind a valuable scholarship for Australian National University Aboriginal students.

Dr Helen Ross in her paper on 'town camps' highlighted a new way of looking at contemporary living sites as being part of Indigenous culture, and places where Aborigines themselves are more comfortable than whites expect. Other papers were presented by Dr Anna Schnukal on migration in the Torres Strait, by Dr John Taylor on Indigenous identification and enumeration in the late twentieth century and Professor Jack Calwell on Australian Aborigines and global population questions. Professor John Mulvaney presented his highly

speculative work on how long Australia has been occupied from first known data on living sites and the size of the population in 1788 when the British arrived.⁴ Len Smith built on Mulvaney's final argument on the number of people living in Australia before the European colonists arrived. As pointed out in the proceedings of the publication, given Mulvaney's standing, his estimates might now be accepted as definitive!

Len Smith and I presented a paper together in which we examined the period between the two wars, a time when native populations in Australia were thought to be in terminal decline. We showed that the Aboriginal population was already shifting from decline to recovery. The collection of papers was bought together and published under the title of *The Aboriginal population revisited: 70 000 years to the present* by Aboriginal History as the tenth in their Monograph series in 2002.

About this time, due in part to the badgering of Neville Perkins, myself and Professor John Richards, a Pro-Vice Chancellor, a review of Indigenous education was initiated on campus and as a result more funding became available for Indigenous initiatives. Len Smith and the head of the History Program at the time Barry Higman approached the new Vice Chancellor, Professor Ian Chubb, with a proposal to create a new Centre for Indigenous History. Funds were allocated and Professor Ann McGrath was appointed head of the new centre. I was appointed as a Research Fellow for three years.

One of the projects involved in the new centre was collaboration between our centre and the Universities of Yale, Ontario and Virginia. The overall program was called 'Frontier Histories'. As part of the project a series of conferences were held at the National Museum of Australia and the Australian National University, later it involved taking a large group of the American academics to the Northern Territory. While there, we gave lectures at many of the academic institutions and visited various tourist attractions. Later Anne McGrath worked in partnership with the National Museum of Australia to produce a documentary video 'A Frontier Conversation'. The film on one level is a simple and watchable account of a group of historians visiting the Northern Territory, but it has an underlying message about the complex problem of the different uses that history is put to in different cultural settings and over long periods of time.

In the process of touring many of the American academics wanted to know about my background and this stimulated me to give a number of lectures both on my biography and my perspectives of the Aboriginal past. In hindsight it was this interest in my life and knowledge of Aborigines that gave me the inspiration and enthusiasm to start thinking about writing this memoir. The

4 Briscoe and Smith 2002.

thought crystallised more as time went on and I spent most of my remaining research time preparing for this task. Following the Northern Territory project a number of ideas became clear in my mind: that I should write about my own past and the boys I grew up with together with my family's origins and experiences in the face of European expansion.

I continued with my research as a Visiting Fellow in the department after my tenure in the centre finished. This time as a Fellow which gave me a chance to research my own and my family's – Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal – pasts. It also helped me to look more closely at the creation of the 'Native Institutions' in which my mother and I were interned as 'wards of the Commonwealth government'. At the same time I became involved with the planning of a conference on children's history organised by the Charles Darwin University. I presented a paper on the origins of 'The half caste problem' and its effects on my and other peoples' lives, from the 1870s to the late 1960s,⁵ it gave me the opportunity to think and write about my background and prepare for some of the complexities the memoir would no doubt throw up.

I feel that almost as a footnote to my working life I was awarded membership of the Order of Australia in the second highest grade of Officer, or 'AO' on Australia day in 2004. The citation mentioned my work in establishing the first Aboriginal Medical and Legal Services in Redfern in the early 1970s, as architect of the National Trachoma and Eye Health Program and my academic attainments. I later learnt that it was my friend Ian Howie-Willis who nominated me. The award was presented to me that April in a ceremony at Government House, Yarralumla by the Governor General, Lieutenant-General Michael Jefferies. As much as anything I was gratified that my long-standing friend Dr Tom Gavranic received an award at the same time for his work in the Aboriginal and Croatian communities over many decades. The two families celebrated at the Government House garden party following the award giving ceremonies.

Later in 2005 my connection with Alice Springs grew stronger in a much unexpected way. Our second grandson Jack Jonathon Wilde was born on 30 October 2005 in Alice Springs. That made him Umbartuwa, an Arrernte word for 'born in this place'. Lisa and her partner Shaun lived in Alice Springs at the time and it was particularly pleasing to me that Jack was born in my place of birth. Jack was a healthy seven pound plus baby with very dark eyes and hair just like his father. Shaun is a Kalkadoon man from Mount Isa where his extended family still lives. Jack was named after his maternal grandfather, Jack Wilde, who came from Sudan Station near Lake Nash on the Northern Territory/Queensland border, where Shaun is a Native Title Holder. Lisa and Shaun lived in Mount Isa for a time; Shaun as a public servant and Lisa as a

5 Briscoe 2008:7-22.

lawyer with the Aboriginal Legal Service. For Lisa it was an insight into rural life as she represented people on the court circuit in outlying areas around the Isa. It meant flying to small communities such as Mornington Island, Cloncurry, Dajarra and Boulia on a week-on week-off basis. An experience I am sure she will never forget. In Alice Springs Lisa's work focused more on child protection that has now become her preferred area of work. She claims that work-related visits to the town camps have opened her eyes to the abject poverty that many of the children live in.

As a father it has been particularly satisfying that Aaron and Lisa have both spent time in Alice Springs as working adults. While Lisa's social focus has been more on the in-town relatives and old friends of mine, Aaron's love is the bush people. He is never happier than when he picks up a four-wheel drive in Alice and goes out bush to meet up with family at places such as Oak Valley Station where my cousin Mary, Robert and family live. More often than not he continues south to Titjikala and Umuwa where more of my mother's relatives live.

During the mid-1990s we bought a fisherman's shack on the south coast of New South Wales. The South Coast is often called 'Canberra's playground' and is a manageable two-hour drive from the capital, with pristine beaches and unspoilt natural beauty. We found ourselves enjoying the coast more and in 2004 started to think about making it our permanent home. The original house on the block was fine for holidays but was badly affected by damp, making it unliveable on a permanent basis or to extend. Plans were drawn up; we started building in 2006 and moved to the South Coast on a permanent basis in early 2007.

As this memoir draws to a close I reflect on my original intentions, clarified by one of my learned history colleagues who advised me early on that: 'You should begin by telling the story from when you were born, tell us what your life was like, who were the people who influenced your life and what events took up so much of your life that you couldn't escape them?' One of the things I've tried to do in this memoir is to give those Aboriginal men and women most important in my life a character and a biography upon which others can build – an historiography of, inclusion.

This memoir has not necessarily been a diatribe to evaluate and criticise those who were drawn into becoming involved in what is now called 'The stolen generations' but more what was once called the 'half-caste problem'. My aim was to place the context of my life in the overall polity of the last century of Aboriginal affairs. As a young man I could not escape my family's background, nor could my mother's people escape those forces in society that shaped them. However, my interpretation of those people involved in my life, I believe, has been assertive but fair. Then of course there were those people that my earlier

life crossed who will want to see themselves in the text: either because they had a similar time at the House or because they ended up at another institution. However, this story of my life, like most historical accounts represents a selective process where limitations on the text, the importance of parallel events of my own family, my education and my involvement with many people have shaped the narrative. Some people I have known have entered my life significantly through family members and they will know who they are and why they have not entered the text while others have entered fleetingly and earned a mention. I have tried to stick closely to the political text because I think this story is one of significance, and that Aboriginal emancipation, as CD Rowley so clearly stated in his monumental trilogy of the history of 'Aboriginal Policy and Practice', is the history of Aboriginal politics.⁶ And, finally as Hobsbawm, the historian puts it so eloquently whereas: 'Biographies end with the subject's death. Autobiographies have no such natural termination'⁷but perhaps the natural termination of this memoir is one for others to follow on with as I enter my three-score years and ten.

6 Rowley 1970, 1971a, 1971b.

7 Hobsbawm 2002: 411.

