

Preface

In part, my Aboriginal identity has shaped my life; in part too, my life has been shaped by the race laws straddling the twentieth century under which my family lived. In this memoir I bring my Aboriginal origins as a Marduntjara person to life revealing both events I have been involved in together with some of the people who shared the journey with me. The story begins in the late nineteenth century and leads to: my grandmother Kanaki's move from traditional life to Lilla Creek for the birth of my mother; my mother's subsequent removal from Larapinta to Stuart in 1927; my birth in 1938, and onwards through my institutionalised childhood; the raising of my political consciousness and experiences, and finally, a life in academia.

Why did I write this memoir? The driving idea behind this memoir was the need to document the history of a group of Aborigines who were institutionalised from birth but saw liberty, equality and fraternity as more important than notoriety. Most of my contemporaries grew up in the boys' home, neither returning to their parents nor their homelands. Moreover, some died at their own or other people's hands and were pushed into an unattainable conformity that forced us all to have a distorted perspective of Australian nationalism. But to begin at the beginning, this memoir is about aspects of my life, what I learnt and memorised and what I was told about the lives of my Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal relatives.

Unlike many people of Aboriginal descent, I believe that if we do not write factually about ourselves we face the tragedy of letting others monopolise us as a people. This monopoly was an ideological goal of the Commonwealth and states' 'assimilation policy', and as such they took away Aboriginal peoples' heritage, their lands, along with their long term family relationships and inheritances. It first dawned on me to articulate my background in the 1980s, while working as the history officer at the Australian Institute for Aboriginal Studies in Canberra. During this time I worked in the field of reconstructing people's past and studying the discipline of history at the Australian National University.

The traditional way of retaining the Aboriginal past and culture was by telling stories, using dance and creative thinking like recounting dreams and drawing patterns on the ground. Today, these traditional techniques have to be meshed with new ways of thinking. This process, however, is unacceptable to most Australian scholars because it lacks a recorded capacity to critique one's self, to have an acceptable common language, a way of storing material to enhance, and to evaluate the narrative. However, sometime later, following completion of my own research and writings for higher degrees, the conviction was still with

me. I still believed that the Aboriginal past had to be written and not created out of the remnants of an alienated or secret society built on stories alone. Secret societies are anathema to history for obvious reasons and this in some way explains why anthropologists do not understand history. Modern history is derived out of principles emerging from the political and epistemological ideas of the French Revolution, most notably the now familiar notions of liberty, equality and fraternity.

The idea to write this memoir was cemented in my mind after talking to a number of American scholars following a study tour of the Northern Territory. They were adamant that I was possibly the best person to reconstruct this narrative. It would be about the children I grew up with and their experiences, through my eyes, and would probably not be written unless I did so. Although there are many boys that have survived and gone on to lead fruitful lives, many have perished. By doing this work I have made a start but have left much to be done by other younger Aboriginal scholars and I hope they will accept the challenge.

It will come as a revelation to some readers that nearly 100 years after Captain Cook landed and claimed New South Wales as a British possession my ancestors had had no contact with Europeans. This fact gave me confidence to tell the story about how slow and tortuous the expansion into the centre of Australia really was. It is not surprising, then, that many of my people were born of people who could remember seeing the first whites when they entered Marduntjara and Arrernte lands. Aboriginal relatives of my generation can recall their fathers, mothers, brothers and sisters telling them stories about Europeans such as John McDougall Stuart passing through Larapinta, or what was later renamed the Finke River, in the 1860s. And later the coming of the telegraph line followed by sheep and cattle, pastoralists, and the rail extension in the 1890s from Oodnadatta reaching Stuart, later renamed Alice Springs, in 1929. My mother Eileen was about nine years of age during this later period of colonial expansion.

This memoir also hopes to capture the essence of what was happening in the broader sense in Aboriginal affairs. I use significant landmark issues in Aboriginal social and political history as a way of weaving these events into the fabric of my own personal narrative. By definition, although this memoir focuses on my actions, experiences and memories, I have been inspired by other peoples' deeds and biographies. I am indebted to two other Aborigines in particular, with whom I have had life-long social and political relationships and who have written autobiographies.¹ There have been a number of ghosted biographies or novels written about special events involving Aborigines, but possibly only one is based on primary documentation. It is therefore one of my

1 Perkins C 1975. See also Read 1990; Moriarty 2000.

challenges to draw on primary, secondary and oral sources. Additionally, it is as important to record the primary oral sources and memories passed on to me by my relatives when they were alive.

This book reflects on my, and my family's background, involving the making of aspects of Aboriginal political and social history during the period from the late nineteenth through to the twentieth century and beyond into the new millennium; a past beginning in the Northern Territory, moving to other states, although never gaining liberty from 'race laws'. As the reader might appreciate, my reflections on such laws and the way they were administered, are both personal and subjective. For all my objectivity as a historian, I am angered to reflect on the way such legislation impacted on the lives of people like me who were once classified 'half-castes', and worse. (I won't use the inverted commas around 'half-castes' again.) Somehow – as this book elaborates – I survived the experiences of growing up half-caste but many of my relatives, inmates and friends did not; and that for me is the well-spring of an enduring bitterness.

The story opens with a short narrative on my Aboriginal and white ancestors. Then, because I believe the Christian religion became a tool of racial folly, I examine how this 'bad faith' affected my and my family's lives. It continues with my birth in 1938 at the 'Old Telegraph Station' but also discusses other half-caste institutions in and around Alice Springs. There were three different sites for what people referred to as 'the Bungalow' and 'my' Bungalow was the former Alice Springs Telegraph Station in the 1930s. The 'renovations' had added dormitories, converting it into a Native Institution. Over time, these dormitories housed thousands of children from 1914 until Paul Hasluck and Menzies introduced their 'New Assimilation' program during the period 1951-1952.

I use oral and documentary source material to build the historical narrative of events in the early chapters. As a historian I am fortunate because a lot of documentary evidence about Aborigines is available. Before 1972 most people identifying as Aborigines were wards of the state or federal governments and subject to government race laws, and, as such, records were kept of their movements. This record keeping, while not perfect, was even more diligently kept on Aborigines who came under Commonwealth control; those Aborigines born or living in institutions or reserves, in the Northern Territory, entered the records. In 1911 the South Australian government handed over all its administrative records to the Federal government when it became responsible for the Northern Territory. The National Archives either in Canberra or their state branches hold a substantial amount of the documentary sources from that era to the present. All of these data are available to researchers. I also tap into scholarly material held by national and state libraries and archives on Mardu traditional and material culture.

The availability of secondary sources means that I have drawn on a stock of sources written by scholars as well as novelists and political writers. Since the 1960s a large number of important works and special collections, indexes and encyclopaedias have been discovered or published. The Australian National University, in particular, hosted a series called 'Aborigines in Australian Society' through the Social Science Research Council of Australia. In 1964, Professor CD Rowley was appointed Director of the project. Rowley's objective was to:

Elucidate the problems arising from contact between Aborigines and non-Aborigines and formulating policy implications from these; drawing together existing knowledge in various parts of Australia and underlying such further original research as can be carried out over a period of three years.²

Rowley used demographic methods to identify the components of the Aboriginal population and, in doing so, identified modern Aborigines. He linked historical records with journals of everyday life with anthropological studies. Rowley mostly drew on secondary writings by anthropologists and archaeologists when he wrote his trilogy because he was unaware of the primary source documents. Covering a new perspective, Rowley narrated 200 years from the first British colony at Botany Bay and Sydney Cove to the failed operations of both the 'protection' and 'assimilation' policies of the late-1960s. The funding of Rowley's project came from the Myer Foundation and was completed in the early 1970s with a three-volume study. The project produced many more publications from which I draw too.

The final point that I want to raise is the question of the use of human memory as a historiographical tool. I do not think many would argue with the view that the human memory is notoriously bad, and in many instances deteriorates with age, but it can be both a bane and a boon! Some historians, and many Aborigines, have had to draw on memory to reconstruct their accounts of the past, making them vulnerable to attacks by people like Windschuttle, and others.³ Oral sources or what some call 'oral history' is in my view, really a term depicting what we might call the writing of a history of everyday people. Normally, these everyday people neither write biographies nor write about past events and so their past is collected by oral source material. As colonial invaders took lands and material objects they ignored the Aboriginal past. More than this, British historiography confined the past to whatever Britons wrote or thought about their pasts. This trait has been adopted by Australians, whose political history

² Rowley 1970.

³ Windschuttle 1994.

reflects their narcissism. For these reasons it is understandable that Aborigines want to reconstruct their own past from which they can learn in a qualitatively different way.

Because of these notions, the uses of historiography in the reconstruction of Aboriginal history, has had to be borrowed from progenitors sometimes unable or unwilling to pass on their knowledge. So it has had to be reinvented by adopting general ideas and expressions of concrete feelings. Memory is something at hand, easily used to recount and reconstruct anyone's past. In particular Aborigines have come to use the past as a way of focusing on a fascinating new way of using it through their adaptations of the European cultural past: that is history.

The traditional Aboriginal past is still reliant on memory conjured up by dance, bark and ground painting together with simple and deeply complex story telling of peoples' *Tjukurrpa* (in the Pitjantjatjara language, this is either an unexplainable event or an object like a body wart or dreaming) as well as through common and sacred ceremonies. In doing so Aborigines reconstruct their complex past that shifts and changes in the process of interpreting events they know happened: but that comes from what they remember and from what older custodians have passed on to them; recorded on sacred objects and once held in sacred places.

In this way some historians have seen memory as unreliable in recalling ideas and facts, thereby, calling the Aboriginal past into question or branding Aboriginal ideas as doubtful information. Keith Windschuttle, for example, criticises Aboriginal accounts of massacres and the ill-effects of Liberal and National Party 'assimilation policies' as fabrications of the past. Windschuttle refutes Aboriginal people whose relatives were killed by police or by illegal means as having an unacceptable perspective on what happened.⁴ Therefore, because many Europeans see the written word as fact they have dismissed the idea that many documents are indeed subject to interpretation. Colonial administrations and even Australian government agencies have, in some instances, either omitted or tended to skew records in favour of their own view of the past. Consequently, Aboriginal voices have been either dismissed or ignored, or included as abstractions and shadowy figures.

Some believe the past is another country, and as a historian I accept this proposition as a metaphor, but there are many Aborigines upon whom the past has left terrible scars. I hope to be able to reveal some of these events but, at the same time, soothe some, especially those too young to have been directly

4 Windschuttle 2000: 8-16.

involved, but who have felt the pain of the stories. Historians are builders of narratives in that their work is always a work in progress and I hope this narrative is accepted in this way.

I owe many thanks to a great many people for the help, guidance and inspirational advice that have been given so generously in bringing this memoir to completion. By its very nature in a work such as this there are many more in the text than can ever adequately be thanked. My first debt is to my colleagues in the Department of History program at the Research School of Social Science, Professors Barry Higman, Barry Smith and Anne McGrath who helped me find the genre and to shape the narrative of this work; the greatest part evolving out of morning and afternoon teas in the Coombs refectory. I would also like to thank the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies who gave me a Fellowship that included an office and access to primary and secondary sources, found nowhere else. I am also indebted to the Australian Archives Authority (Australian Capital Territory) staff that helped me find my way around their Aboriginal records collection and other government primary sources.

On an individual basis I owe a sincere debt of gratitude to my friend and colleague Dr Ian Howie-Willis. I am grateful to him for inspiring me to write in an informal narrative genre for this memoir. I also thank him for editing later drafts to his usual professional and polished standard. Similarly, I have a debt of gratitude to Drs John Clanchy and Brigid Ballard of the Australian National University for reading and commenting on the final draft. Their words of wisdom have been invaluable because, like other writers, I looked for critical evaluation and an analytical perspective that they gave willingly. I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge my great friend and colleague Dr Leonard Smith. I thank him for his intellectual inspiration over the last 40 years and for introducing me to the discipline of historical demography; together with linking the narrative to historical theory in this work. I shouldn't forget to thank Father Smith's son John Smith for his writings and showing an interest in my work. I would also like to thank Professor Peter Read and the board of the Aboriginal History Journal for their encouragement.

And finally, as always, my family, and in particular my greatest debt goes to my wife Norma whose unbounding love, dedication and hard work has bought this memoir to fruition. I am indebted to my children Aaron, Lisa and John and their partners, Meredith and Shaun for their unquestioning loyalty. Much of the inspiration behind this memoir has been so that my grandsons Mitchell and Jack know something of their heritage. To my family for their undying support I have a debt that even after presenting this book to them I think I will never be able to repay.