

## ***Redfern: Aboriginal Activism in the 1970s***

by Johanna Perheentupa

xii + 244 pp., Aboriginal Studies Press, 2020,  
ISBN: 9781925302295 (pbk), \$39.95

Review by Heather Goodall  
University of Technology Sydney

This is a valuable, carefully researched and engaging book that offers thoughtful insights into an important period in Aboriginal and wider Australian politics. The 1970s saw heated activity and many changes in the diverse settings of Aboriginal politics across the continent, including the varied areas of a large city like Sydney, so it is not surprising that this book cannot consider them all. The young activists in Redfern in the 1970s saw themselves as leading events right across the country, assuming a 'pan-Aboriginality' in which they felt comfortable speaking for others. Their self-assessment was inflated but nevertheless, as Perheentupa demonstrates, there were innovative and creative developments taking place in Redfern as Aboriginal people grappled with very new circumstances.

Yet there had been many Aboriginal people living across Sydney since the invasion began, as Denis Foley, Peter Read, Leanne Mulgo Watson and Grace Karskens, Heidi Norman and many others have demonstrated.<sup>1</sup> The Redfern activists seemed at times to be unaware of this continuing Aboriginal population and at other times dismissive, as Perheentupa acknowledges.

This book is particularly important because it looks carefully at the development of various self-help organisations in Redfern over the 1970s that had significant differences in operation, structure and alliances, despite at times sharing personnel and rhetoric. These activists, having had better access to formal education than earlier generations, had each come to Sydney seeking further training, ranging from apprenticeships to law degrees. This allowed them to meet and recruit as allies the rising numbers of activist students who were looking for approaches to

---

<sup>1</sup> Foley, *Repossession*; Foley and Read, *What the Colonists Never Knew*; Read and Sukovic, 'Pieces of a Thousand Stories'; Norman, 'Aboriginal Redfern'; Karskens et al., 'Real Secret River'.

counter the inequalities they were identifying themselves. As well, however, their strategies also drew on approaches emerging internationally, particularly in the cities of the United States, where African-American activists were setting up self-help organisations to challenge the legal and utility discrimination they faced, often recognisable to Aboriginal eyes. To point out such similarities, the Redfern activists effectively mobilised the terms and icons of the Black Panther movement, but their most practical borrowing was the concept of self-help organisations. The strategies they tried out in Redfern were useful models – of both what might work but also what might not work! – for other Aboriginal groups as they tried to plan strategic approaches to the conditions they faced in varying circumstances across the country. Such strategies suited the times; there were interested, radical non-Indigenous students who were looking for anti-racist campaigns to support, and at the same time, there were governments – both conservative and labour – interested in funding self-help programs that would fill glaring gaps in service delivery, but with the expectation that such fast-track ‘self-management’ would lead to an equality that allowed the special services to disappear.

The book explores the way the self-help organisations set up in the 1970s took different approaches to asserting Aboriginal control and to dealing with the interference of government funders. Some of these differences related to different leadership affiliations – a number of the key organisations were controlled by people from Wiradjuri areas, often from Cowra and closely related to the Coe family.

Others were more closely associated with people from coastal areas, notably the northern coast Bandjalang, Gumbayngirr and Dhang-gati groups but also south coastal Yuin and Jerrinja people. More important for Perheentupa’s analysis, however, is the question of the service delivered. She argues that the Aboriginal Legal Service (ALS), in organising lawyers and legal advice, was delivering a service for which there was no alternative – there had been no community legal aid or public defenders structures set up at that time – so the ALS had greater bargaining power to defy the intrusive accounting and reporting demands of the Department of Aboriginal Affairs. The Aboriginal Medical Service (AMS), on the other hand, was mobilising resources around health care, with an extensive public health system already established, giving the AMS less bargaining power. The outcome was a difference in the structures of management, with no non-Aboriginal people on the ALS board – professional or otherwise – whereas the AMS always had non-Indigenous people in board positions and worked on a more collaborative process of policy development.

Gender was another significant variable among organisations. In those organisations seen as relating particularly to women – namely the AMS and Murawina Childcare service – there were far more female workers and board members. Both these organisations also utilised a less confrontational approach to government although

maintaining the importance of self-determination and cultural independence. Notably, this difference mirrored dominant gender roles and – it could be argued – the masculine dominance of the Redfern activist group in general.

Among the organisations examined, Black Theatre was in many ways least like the others, although a number of the leaders in other organisations took roles in Black Theatre productions. Led (at least some of the time) by a woman, it had strong New South Wales Builders Labourers' Federation (BLF) support yet was the least hetero-normative and least confrontational of all of them. Furthermore, it operated as the least sectarian, offering a more comfortable, welcoming meeting place for people from diverse affiliations and organisations than any other Aboriginal-controlled organisational space in Redfern. Yet Black Theatre struggled with the federal and state governments' disinterest in supporting any type of cultural organisations, even during the Whitlam Labor years. As well, it suffered from divisions among its participants over what areas of the arts to be supported and how best to offer spaces and facilities for that support. The absence of a substantive property in Redfern was evident for this organisation – it simply had no safe space.

It is not surprising that the organisation that experienced most non-Indigenous resistance was the Aboriginal Housing Company, also with strong BLF support, and which was funded to purchase significant areas of land in the gentrifying suburb. Perheentupa offers yet another careful and valuable analysis of the complex politics and challenges of this organisation as it tried to chart a course between the hostility of local whites and the tensions among Redfern activists.

Heidi Norman has argued persuasively in the case of Land Councils that conflict with government nevertheless led to increased 'legibility' in Aboriginal organisations, allowing effective management by governments, despite the rising and determined resistance of activists to such interference.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, these Redfern organisations and others like them did allow a platform for Aboriginal leaders to speak back to demands that they conform to government controls. In the lessons learned as Aboriginal people in other areas observed the conflictual interactions in Redfern – both within the organisations and with government – the wave of innovation and creativity arguably passed to those organisations outside Sydney that distanced themselves from Redfern in later years. Perhaps the most lasting achievement of the Redfern activists, despite – or perhaps because – their approaches were abrasive and at times counterproductive, was to challenge 'cultural erasure'. As Perheentupa argues:

Their location in Redfern and in the everyday lives of local Aboriginal people underlined their belonging in a settler-colonial city which, in non-Indigenous minds, had been discursively emptied of Indigenous presence. (p. 182)

---

2 Norman, 'What Do We Want?'

## References

- Foley, Denis. *Repossession of Our Spirit: Traditional Owners of Northern Sydney*. Canberra: Aboriginal History Inc., 2001.
- Foley, Denis and Peter Read. *What the Colonists Never Knew: A History of Aboriginal Sydney*. Canberra: National Museum of Australia Press, 2020. doi.org/10.1080/1031461x.2021.1907876.
- Karskens, Grace, Leanne Mungo Watson, Erin Wilkins, Jasmine Seymour, Rhiannon Wright and Cindy Laws. 'Real Secret River: Dyarubbin Project'. Published as an interactive map and associated digital videos in the Dictionary of Sydney, archived 2021. dictionaryofsydney.org/artefact/real\_secret\_river\_dyarubbin\_project.
- Norman, Heidi. 'Aboriginal Redfern *Then* and *Now*: Between the Symbolic and the Real'. *Australian Aboriginal Studies* 2021, no. 1 (2021): 22–35.
- Norman, Heidi. *'What Do We Want?': A Political History of Aboriginal Land Rights in NSW*. Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2015.
- Read, Peter, and Suzana Sukovic. 'Pieces of a Thousand Stories: Repatriation of the History of Aboriginal Sydney'. *Cosmopolitan Civil Societies Journal* 2, no. 3 (2010): 40–54. doi.org/10.5130/ccs.v2i3.1599.

This text is taken from *Aboriginal History*, Volume 46, 2022, edited by  
Crystal McKinnon and Ben Silverstein, published 2023 by ANU Press,  
The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.