

## *Country Women and the Colour Bar: Grassroots Activism and the Country Women's Association*

by Jennifer Jones

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Review by Sue Taffe  
Centre for Indigenous Studies  
Monash University

When we consider the complex issues involved in any movement for social change and reform we tend to place the action in cities. Country towns, generally thought to be more interested in preserving the status quo than challenging it, do not usually come to mind. *Country Women and the Colour Bar* is thus an unusual work in that it is about social change, and the unsettling of community preconceptions regarding Aboriginal Australians in half a dozen towns in the mid-twentieth century. Jennifer Jones examines Country Women's Association (CWA) branches which collaborated with Aboriginal women, during the period from 1956 to 1972, to establish CWA Aboriginal branches and thus assist in their cultural assimilation into the broader communities. During these 16 years the political landscape changed dramatically as the author observes, from segregated Aboriginal communities to a more politicised landscape when Charles Perkins and the Freedom Riders visited in 1965.

The book is a fascinating study of the social attitudes and preconceptions about Aboriginal people held by non-Indigenous country women in New South Wales towns close to Aboriginal reserves. Without power, sewerage or water, Aboriginal residents were often spurned by the broader community. The gap between the white and Aboriginal women was immense: the Aboriginal women were poor, with large families, no private transport and were controlled by restrictive state legislation, while the white women had stoves and cars, their citizenship was unencumbered and they were confident in their view of the world.

Aboriginal CWA branches were established at Boggabilla in Queensland, just over the New South Wales border, and at Grafton, Kempsey, Taree, Griffith and Nowra in New South Wales. *Country Women and the Colour Bar* is structured as a series of six case studies which examine the circumstances of leading local women to present arguments for the establishment of an Aboriginal CWA branch and the various strategies which are employed to bridge the cultural gap between the two groups of women. Near each town was an Aboriginal reserve where people lived segregated lives without access to services. The CWA women who supported the establishment of Aboriginal branches acted within an assimilationist framework offering friendship, and education to assist Aboriginal women to make their way in the broader community. These women were also educated by the contact. 'You mean to say you haven't got stoves!' a representative of the Taree branch clarified with the Aboriginal residents of Purfleet. This led to a successful campaign to get stoves installed in all the cottages.

We also gain insights into an Aboriginal view of the social interaction with white women. The baking of scones, seen as a hallmark of successful country women, was introduced to Aboriginal women who had been cooking scones in the coals for generations. They were amused at the white women's ignorance. Aboriginal CWA members had to learn that every request had to be put in writing before a decision could be made. This was valuable experience in negotiating within the CWA committee structure.

Negative stereotypes of Aboriginal people were recognised as a serious impediment to Aboriginal assimilation into the wider community. CWA branches employed inclusive strategies to encourage acceptance. The Burnt Bridge-Greenhill CWA, near Kempsey, held its first baby show where white judges assessed the beautiful, chubby Aboriginal babies. At Grafton the annual Queen of the Jacaranda festival competition was used to promote a poised, attractive, young Aboriginal woman. Rachel 'Dolly' Mundine was nominated and supported by the Copmanhurst-Baryulgil Branch of the Country Women's Association in 1968. Mick Mundine, Dolly's brother, acknowledged that it was 'a big thing for Aboriginal people, to go and try to be the Jacaranda Queen'. Dolly was not crowned but, as Jones points out, the fact of her inclusion validated Aboriginal women's interest in fashion and demonstrated their abilities in public speaking and fundraising, providing entrees into white country women's social world.

On both sides of the cultural divide successes in collaboration and communication could be traced to the drive and vision of women who were prepared to listen and negotiate. Thelma Bate, a member of the CWA executive, worked tirelessly, believing that integration of Aboriginal children into the mainstream white community depended upon the education of their mothers. Foundation president of the Purfleet CWA, Ella Simon, was a dogged advocate for supported

self-help. These women, and others like them, were responsible for practical improvements, such as the acquisition of stoves, and less tangible advances such as the development of pride in Aboriginality, expressed through the Gillawarra Gift Shop set up with the support of the Taree CWA to sell Aboriginal artefacts to tourists.

By the early 1970s Aboriginal CWA branches had closed or were in decline. Branches closed for a number of reasons, some local, others due to changes in the wider community. In the post-referendum period there was a growth in Aboriginal confidence in forming their own organisations, and with the election of the Whitlam Government in 1972 such initiatives were supported financially. In a publication marking the 50th anniversary of the organisation, however, Aboriginal behaviour was given as the reasons for the demise of Aboriginal branches, indicating an unpreparedness to acknowledge the validity of different cultural understandings and priorities on behalf of the white CWA members. It took time for a more reflective view to be expressed, with CWA historian Helen Townsend suggesting in the 1980s that closures were more likely to have been due to Aboriginal women developing their own priorities. White women retired hurt when 'the tenuous common ground was broken' according to Townsend.

Based on interviews with more than 40 people, *Country Women and the Colour Bar* provides us with valuable insights into how the CWA in some New South Wales country towns tried to assist isolated and impoverished Aboriginal communities. Given the power imbalance and the growth of an Aboriginal voice in these communities in the mid-twentieth century it is not surprising that the collaborations eventually waned.

Visuals add another dimension to the book. Gloved and hatted women, well presented for the world – Dolly Mundine with the other Queen of Jacaranda contestants, Ella Simon addressing the Purfleet branch – all help us to remember the very different world of the mid-twentieth century. A map is provided marking the towns where CWA branches worked for the establishment of Aboriginal branches in the nearby Aboriginal settlements. For readers who are unfamiliar with the location of the Aboriginal settlements and their proximity to country towns, however, it would have been very helpful to have them marked on the map as well.

Appreciation of the difficulty in achieving and maintaining cross-cultural collaborations continues to be necessary today. Acceptance of cultural difference can go hand-in-hand with support, as Indigenous people strive to empower their youth to find their futures in both their communities and in the broader world. This book makes a valuable contribution, showing the inevitable misunderstandings as well as the successes, in the long story of relations between Indigenous and settler Australians.

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