

Just Relations: The Story of Mary Bennett's Crusade for Aboriginal Rights

by Alison Holland

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In this excellent book, Alison Holland provides the first full-length study of the life and career of one of Australia's most outstanding national and international advocates for Aboriginal rights in the twentieth century. Her study of Mary Montgomery Bennett is impressive for its rich research, thoughtful analysis, and for the sheer breadth of its reach and perspective. While this is a significant study of a woman activist and commentator on Aboriginal rights in Australia, it is also an expert investigation of the overlapping spheres of British, Australian, and Aboriginal history from the 1920s to the 1960s, and of international humanitarianism and settler colonialism in an era of emerging Dominion Australian identity on the world stage.

The importance of remembering Bennett is thoroughly and thoughtfully set out in this book. One of the many indications of Bennett's impact, ironically, was official efforts to close down her legacy soon after her death. Holland opens and closes her book with the removal by authorities of Bennett's personal archives from her home; thanks to the persistence of close friends, they were eventually reclaimed but, improbably, disappeared once again this time permanently after being stolen in the night from a garage where they had been stowed for safe keeping. In this startling story Holland sees powerful evidence of government concern regarding Bennett's accusations, despite abiding official rejection of her calls for urgent reform. From the late 1920s, despite her own critique and that of many of her friends, correspondents and colleagues in Australia and overseas (all of whom are present in this book), Australian authorities remained resolutely indignant at the idea of humanitarian intervention in national affairs.

The longevity and resilience of Bennett's pursuit of Aboriginal rights can be measured also in the series of important publications she produced, each discussed by Holland in some detail. From 1927 until (posthumously) 1957, Bennett authored significant books, pamphlets, conference papers, newspaper articles and memoranda: each directed at Australian and international readerships towards changing public opinion and reconfiguring official policies. They include *The Australian Aborigine as a Human Being* (1930), *Teaching the Aborigines* (1935) and *Hunt and Die* (1950). Then there is the evidence she gave at inquiries, her letters to newspapers, and various commentaries on government conferences and official reports. In combination, they indicate a level of public debate in Australia about Aboriginal affairs, pointing to the vibrancy of contemporary critique rather than its absence. From the interwar years to the postwar decades, the names of policies changed but Bennett saw in them the same fundamental errors and cruelties. She gave evidence at the Moseley Royal Commission in 1934, for example, only to reprise many of the same arguments almost 15 years later at the Bateman inquiry also in Western Australia. Drawing from government reports providing evidence in support of her argument, she was in dialogue with overseas organisations including the Anti-Slavery Society and the British Commonwealth League (the Dominion women's organisation) to which she contributed important information and ideas. Throughout, Bennett insisted that humanitarian standards circulating as best practice internationally via the League of Nations and the International Labour Organization should be applied within Australia. One of the great insights of Holland's book is the significance of British Africa in shaping Bennett's narrative about rights for Aboriginal Australians.

Given this was a life driven by a commitment to the cause, many prices were paid during Bennett's lifetime and one of those very real costs came with the theft of her papers after her death. Holland calls this act a 'violation' upon her life's work stating that her papers 'were a dossier of state malpractice and neglect on a significant scale' (p. 382). Against this violation and its attendant forgetting, Holland has set about reconstructing a political life of seemingly endless energy and determination. Bennett was an inveterate letter writer, a tireless networker and a resolute commentator, and so she appears in archives ranging across Australia and in the United Kingdom, as well as Geneva. Bennett also read widely, and her publications incorporate numerous sources reflecting her proliferation of contacts and connections in Australia and England. Her research and reading, referenced in her publications, in turn mapped an imperial and transnational world view. Holland handles this wealth of archival and published materials with dexterity.

Such a degree of activity expressed not only Bennett's passionate commitment to the cause but the importance of establishing and maintaining a community of like-minded individuals. Sharing information, acknowledging achievement, and mourning failure with correspondents provided vital sustenance for someone who was so often at odds with the status quo. Even a woman as determined and prone to 'self-righteousness' (p. 359) as Bennett clearly was sometimes also experienced despair, because she saw at first-hand the impacts of inhumane policies upon Aboriginal communities while teaching their children on missions, or when supporting many of those who bravely presented evidence on their own behalf at inquiries. Reflecting on Bennett's character, Holland sees the strength of her evangelical outlook, a way of being political that drew as much from the revitalisation of anti-slavery politics in the interwar years as it did from interaction with Aboriginal people themselves.

Holland identifies a crucial moment in this growing sense of commitment when in 1929 Bennett met Anthony Martin Fernando, an Aboriginal man who was also a critic of Britain living in London where he protested outside of Australia House on the Strand and spoke at Hyde Park Corner. Taking his advice to heart that she should work directly with and for Aboriginal people, in middle-age Bennett returned to Australia where she found allies in Rodney and Margaret Schenk at Mt Margaret Mission in Western Australia. Encouraged by their example, she pursued a reform agenda built on self-determination through land, community and education, and the end of so-called protective and assimilationist policies including the removal of children and indenture contravening international standards to which Australia was a signatory. While Bennett was involved in numbers of organisations such as the Council for Aboriginal Rights in the 1950s, during the interwar years only the Aborigines' Protection League shared her commitment to indirect rule for Aboriginal people through the establishment of a central inviolable reserve.

Throughout this sympathetic but also critical study, Holland represents Bennett as inevitably complicit in the complex relationship between humanitarianism and imperial and state control. Even her most radical aim (that of indirect rule), as Holland points out, had already shown to enhance colonial authority when applied to the case of British Africa. And certainly Bennett endorsed western ideas of progress, if seeing an urgent need for their humanisation by learning from Aboriginal social relations and connection to place. She hoped that finding just relations with Aboriginal people would re-humanise modernity, which she considered (in the aftermath of a world war) to be dangerously competitive. As Holland readily admits, from this viewpoint Bennett might well be seen alongside a generation and more of maternal feminists who hoped to secure a place in imperial affairs by claiming to speak in the name of 'native' women's exploitation by white men or by men in their own societies. And it is

the case that women's networks were important to Bennett's career: numbers of leading Australian women reformers and their organisations appear in the pages of this book as her friends and fellow evangelists (while in most cases not supporting her more radical aims). But Holland concludes that Bennett should be remembered instead for much more than welfare reform: for asserting a set of rights for Aboriginal people based on land, employment and education, and above all the ability to determine one's own future.

Several interrelated contexts for understanding Bennett's relatively radical vision are offered in this multifaceted study. Among them is her upbringing, described tangentially in Bennett's glowing account of her father and his treatment of the Aboriginal people living on the land her family occupied in Queensland. Holland writes that she found it hard to interpret aspects of *Christison of Lammermoor* (1927) in which Bennett appeared to valorise her father's use of force in celebrating the supposedly freely negotiated, mutual engagement between himself and the Dalleburra people.

But such contradictions are important to Holland's account, and she goes a long way to answering her difficulty by interrogating Bennett's larger experience as a British Australian woman of middle-class background who found inspiration in the humanitarian style and language of anti-slavery. Along with the League of Nations and the centenary of abolition in 1933, the United States was a crucial element in this heightened global interest in people living under conditions 'akin to slavery'. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was an inspirational text for Bennett, one she hoped Australia would someday match. At the same time as she published her biography about her father, Bennett presented an alternative policy for Aboriginal people at the Dominion women's British Commonwealth League conference (to which she was introduced by fellow activist in London, Edith Jones). Another agenda-setting paper of hers would be read at the same organisation in 1933. In these more political writings, Bennett promoted an idea of White Australia based on cooperation with and respect for the rights of the original inhabitants.

A third context for Bennett's emergence identified by Holland is a changing outlook within Australia towards 'the Aborigines'. During the interwar and into the postwar decades Bennett clashed with administrators like A.O. Neville on the meaning of Aboriginality as well as the white nation-state, but she, too, was influenced by the rise of 'scientific humanism' then driving new ideas about the modernisation of 'native' management nationally and around the world. New interest in Aboriginal people as reflected in public and popular culture saw the proliferation of organisations (whose membership included anthropologists) calling for the reform of Aboriginal policy and the end of injustice. Their activities were spurred on by events at Coniston in 1927 and Caledon Bay in 1933 that revealed to urban Australian and international publics

horrifying evidence of violence and injustice involving police and authorities, as well as ordinary citizens in northern and central Australia. Perhaps more might have been said in this book about the impact of Bennett's work in dialogue with Aboriginal activists themselves, as we learn that she was a correspondent with both the Aborigines' Progressive Association (going to Sydney to attend the Day of Mourning it organised in 1938) and the Australian Aborigines' League, of which she was 'one of the few non-Aboriginal life members' (p. 208).

Bennett's determination to make a difference reminds us of the importance of individuals in efforts to bring about change, in this case by campaigning for Aboriginal rights through mobilising a global discourse on the humanitarian reform of colonisation. This substantial scholarly study reflects the author's own commitment to that struggle and its legacy. In her ambitious account of this life, Holland confirms that Bennett's 'crusade' remains important to our present-day understanding of the history of Aboriginal rights. While worthy of recognition in its own right, that history and its leading figures – like Bennett – continue to have implications for contemporary debate about the relationship between rights and self-determination. Reflecting on the concern of Aboriginal commentators regarding the emphasis on welfare since the New Deal announced for Aboriginal people in the 1950s, Holland reminds us of Bennett's rejection of that approach when it was first introduced, declaring its claim to empower Aboriginal people as little more than another version of the protection and assimilation it purported to replace. If Bennett were here today, Holland concludes, '[she] might have interpreted the crisis of recent years as, at least in part, the failure to heed hers and the humanitarians' warnings before the war' (pp. 365–66).

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