

Colonialism and Its Aftermath: A History of Aboriginal South Australia

edited by Peggy Brock and Tom Gara

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‘We have survived’ is a reassuring and empowering mantra, often reinforced through the ‘welcome to country’ protocol. Now familiar across Australia, that protocol has served as a primary riposte to the notion that Aboriginal culture derives its authenticity from those generations located in a pre-European past. That said, recognition of contemporary Aboriginal structures of authority at public events often seems to rest upon the embrace of those very markers of authenticity – recited introductions in languages no longer spoken informally, smoking rituals and corroboree extracts based on the texts and observations of nineteenth-century ethnographers – which have, until recently, characterised museum exhibits. Contemporary protocols tend to convey an impression of unbroken continuities and beliefs. Perhaps nothing much has been lost; the centre holds after all, and colonialism itself has been just one more challenge thrown at an ancient, obdurate culture.

In an erudite and illuminating set of essays, written both by some of South Australia’s outstanding historians and by Aboriginal leaders relating their own family’s journeys of survival through and beyond the colonial era, this book gently reorients the reader towards a different reality. With perhaps one exception, the essays accumulate compelling evidence for another reading of Aboriginal history, in which the trauma, schisms and discontinuities caused by European colonialism triggered a set of responses which speak of Aboriginal agency, adaptation and survival. Linguist Paul Monaghan opens the book with a succinct, necessary overview of the ‘structures of Aboriginal life’ prior to colonisation in South Australia, before historians Peggy Brock, Tom Gara, Christine Lockwood, Skye Krichauff, Carol Pybus, Robert Foster and Amanda Nettelbeck take the reader through a series of chapters examining

the legacy of colonialism across the South Australian regions, from the first arrival of European sealers on coastal areas, to the encounters with Anangu people in the north-west of the state during the mid-twentieth century. Diane Bell's chapter, which seems based more on ideology and advocacy than upon the historian's craft of revelation through research seems the exception. One must turn back to Graham Jenkin's *Conquest of the Ngarrindjeri* (1979) for a balanced analysis of policy and personal experience.

In recent times the discourse surrounding the Stolen Generation/s has tended to focus the attention of historians on institutional histories of missions and settlements, justifiably positioning Aboriginal people as victims, their autonomy destroyed through government, mission policy and an expanding 'culture of dependency', which decades of 'self determination' have not dispelled. South Australia's principal colonial founders were certainly aware of Aboriginal property rights (albeit poorly understood) and had envisaged a harmonious, if unachievable accommodation with the colony's Indigenous peoples. Small reserves in southern regions were created during the 1840s and 1850s on the assumption that Aboriginal people might adopt European agriculture, with their rights secured through the appointment of a Protector of Aborigines. As these ideals began to fail, and as Aboriginal people lost control over their lands and waters, this token 'protection' took on a practical aspect, with a rapidly expanding network of ration depots supplied by a government that still perceived a responsibility to compensate Aboriginal people for the losses they had suffered. Foster and Nettelbeck, Brock and Gara lay this sequence out in the opening chapters, noting that South Australia persisted in its appointments of a single, centralised Protector of Aborigines whose powers over Aboriginal lives steadily expanded, ultimately codified in the *Aborigines Act 1911*.

Most of the book's case studies confirm the centrality of this Act in affecting the lives of South Australian Aboriginal people, perhaps for two key reasons involving the Protector's almost untrammelled legal and administrative power. He could break up Aboriginal families with the stroke of a pen, and after 1911 the assumption of government authority over missions such as Point MacLeay, Point Pearce and Koonibba effectively turned their residents into incarcerated, second-class citizens. That legacy of disadvantage has affected almost all Aboriginal families in southern South Australia at least into the present day. In this respect, *Colonialism and Its Aftermath* tends to follow a well-trodden path, but perhaps its real value lies in the fact that most of its writers have also tapped into another lode – the lives of Aboriginal people who were not snared in the institutional net but were somehow able to fashion an independent existence, both before and after the Act. This is where one begins to perceive that contemporary Aboriginal identity does not rest on a quaint set of rehearsed rituals, but on the shared experience of riding the shocks and trauma of colonialism. In this respect, the short contributions to this book by Aboriginal people themselves (made independently or in partnership with

historians) resonate greatly. These vignettes contain powerful imagery of the way in which the colonised people of the Adelaide Plains, south-east, Yorke Peninsula, Murray and Lakes, Eyre Peninsula, Flinders Ranges, west coast, north-east and north-west of the state managed to fashion meaningful lives and to adapt on their own terms to an upended social reality. The vignette provided by Bunganditj man of the lower south-east Des Hartman resonates in this way. His account makes it clear that cultural details such as moiety affiliations and even the consciousness of 'correct marriages' can survive the trauma of unrestrained colonialism, with its triple serving of violence, disease and dispossession, into a present in which Hartman himself is playing a real role, particularly with the revitalisation of the language.

This book is the first concerted survey of what became of South Australia's principal Aboriginal cultural groups since the colonial period. The commonalities between the chapters are instructive in terms of the traumatic effect of colonisation, but so also are the particularities of the strategies and compensations developed by Aboriginal people within the limits of autonomy they were able to preserve for themselves, both within and outside the confines of the 'culture of dependency' and state authority. This book could be a model for a series of fine-grained histories that acknowledge and explore that agency, founded less on vague memory of ethnographic authenticity and more on the diverse ways in which Aboriginal people have negotiated colonialism's aftermath.

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