

2. Conlon's Remarkable Circus

Cassandra Pybus

Alf Conlon (1908–61) was a visionary. He would not have known it, but his ideology had similarities with the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci. Conlon had a belief that the ideas that shape society come from a fairly small elite united by shared intellectual premises, and he sought to use the chaos of the war to establish a new kind of elite in Australia. What Gramsci termed 'organic intellectuals' Conlon thought of as his intellectual underground. When the war had begun to pose a direct threat to Australia, he could see that the fallout was going to destroy the credibility of the existing elites and undermine the derived power of the conventional establishment. He recognised the possibility of using the chaos to build a new power group with progressive ideas, organic to Australian society and based on intellect. No Marxist, Conlon insisted his 'New Men' would be a classless elite, yet those he had in mind were lower-middle-class boys like himself who had come to university through the selective State school system. The poet James McAuley was typical of Conlon's incipient elite: brainy, ambitious, contemptuous and, most importantly, a product of Conlon's alma mater, Fort Street Boys High, Sydney, as were Hal Stewart, Ian Hogbin, Jim Plimsoll and a brilliant law graduate named John Kerr.

Born and bred in Sydney, Conlon probably thought himself *sui generis*. That was certainly how he was seen by his admiring friends at Sydney University. The most obvious accoutrement of the Conlon persona was his pipe: occasionally sucking on it between words, more usually, using it to point, to rub the back of his neck, scratch his balls, or stick it, stem first, into his ear or nostril. Once in verbal flight, Conlon could be mesmerising, especially for impressionable minds, as Donald Horne recounts:

He seemed an ordinary man, yet when he talked he could conjure up great visions, as if the smoke from his pipe was being shaped into the mirages of wisdom... 'what this country needs is a good sociology'. He would linger over 'sociology', with a long stress on each syllable, chew his pipe for a while, then point it. 'And it's people like you who will provide it'. I had scarcely heard of the word 'sociology' but I would wave my glass of beer in general agreement and wait silently for Alf's next statement. He was talking some of the language of planning—words like 'scientific manpower control' that did not seem to have meaning—enlivened the imagination with the romance of manipulation and the

language of change, peering into the future of the war for exciting possibilities. New ideas were coming up. New things would happen. And we would be among them.¹

With this kind of technique, Conlon managed to entrance minds more worldly than wide-eyed, young Donald. He had a real gift for talking on any subject with apparent insight and intellect, drawing on an astonishing range of superficial knowledge and convincing his audience, one to one, of their own special importance in the scheme he had envisaged. A physically nondescript man with a crew cut and horn-rimmed glasses, he was married with a child and was rather old to be an undergraduate. This curious spellbinder probably would have remained nothing more than a great talker and engaging eccentric were it not for the war. In the anxieties of that special time, Conlon found his metier.

It was his position as student representative on the University of Sydney Senate that provided his springboard to power. From the time of his election in 1939, he showed no interest in student concerns; he went straight for the main game: negotiating influence, especially when the university became embroiled in controversy over the appointment of Julius Stone to a chair in jurisprudence in 1940–41. Stone had been the unanimous choice of the appointment committee, but the implacable opposition of the NSW Bar to this Jew saw his appointment blocked by the Chancellor and three senior legal members of the Senate. Conlon lobbied tirelessly on Stone's behalf, leaking Senate information to Stone in Auckland and his student friends in Sydney; the latter undertook a robust campaign in support of Stone, devoting an entire special issue of the student newspaper, *Honi Soit*, to the scandal. Professors Richard Mills and Alan Stout led the academic response. Stone's appointment was upheld and the various conservatives on the Senate were forced by circumstance to resign, which did wonders for Alf Conlon's position on the Senate. From that time, Mills and Stout were among Conlon's most staunch supporters. No-one was more staunch in his support than Julius Stone. Once installed in the Chair, he gave Conlon the job of hand picking the students to be reserved from call-up to go into law.²

Together with Mills from Economics and Stout from Philosophy, he formed the military subcommittee in 1940—established to consider the utilisation of personnel in the university. Conlon was able to convince his professorial colleagues of the need for a proper manpower policy within the university to best direct the talent pool. He had himself appointed Manpower Officer—to the astonishment and envy of his student friends—with a suite of rooms in the quad, staff and filing cabinets. And access to the top military brass. His maxim was that every door was open. Early in 1940, he walked through the door of

1 Donald Horne, *The Education of Young Donald* (Sydney, 1967), p. 243.

2 Leonie Star, *Julius Stone: An intellectual life* (Sydney and Melbourne, 1992), p. 57.

Brigadier Victor Stantke, who was in charge of the administration of Eastern Command, to put to him the idea that the Army should establish a research section to utilise the intelligent young men at university, rather than wasting them as artillery fodder. Stantke was impressed, although the best he could do, at that time, was put Conlon on a committee investigating an army education scheme that might keep up the morale of the troops.³

Conlon was also a key figure in the establishment of a National Union of Australian University Students, and used his contacts in this sphere to develop his visionary plans. In Melbourne for meetings at various times during 1941, he held heavy drinking soirees with Melbourne intellectuals. Some thought him a blowhard; others were instant converts. 'Panzee' Wright, Professor of Medicine at Melbourne University, found a kindred soul when a student took him to meet Conlon at a house in Toorak. He and Conlon fell into an excited discussion about how to handle the military situation:

It traversed the whole field from reactions of various types of individuals to the sort of effect the war would have on the economy of the country to problems of the psychology of Australian soldiers fighting from Australia instead of the back streets of Paris, and all the rest of it. What would be the difference between the Digger legend of this war and the previous war? All sorts of stuff about herd psychology, problems of tropical medicine. The lot.⁴

They finished talking about 4 am and Wright finally got home to find that his anxious wife had rung the police.

When General Stantke became Adjutant-General in 1941, Conlon's prospects began to look up. Stantke set up the Army Education Service in the Land Army Headquarters (LHQ) in Melbourne and Conlon happily took the credit.⁵ At Ushers, the downtown bar where Conlon's circle drank, he would sound forth about the important work that could be done from within the military. His talk was peppered with the phrase 'Army Education', by which he meant something altogether different from imparting a few skills to the diggers. Whatever the task he had in mind, Conlon could always make it sound thrilling when talking to the boys in Ushers bar, as Donald Horne remembered:

It might be necessary for intellectual integrity to put on its uniform, he explained, and hide itself in the Army for the duration of the coming Barbarians, against which we saw Alf as the main bulwark. 'Have you

3 General Stantke, in John Thompson (ed.), *Alfred Conlon: A memorial by some of his friends* (Sydney, 1963), pp. 102–3.

4 Roy Douglas Wright, in Thompson, *Alfred Conlon*, p. 27. Wright was universally known by his nickname, variously spelt 'Pansy' or 'Panzee'. Conlon addressed him as 'Panz'.

5 Conlon's CV, September 1943, National Archives of Australia [hereinafter NAA], A1608/1, item AK29/1/2.

ever thought’...he pulled his ear thoughtfully as he spoke to us in the pub. ‘Have you ever thought of chaos? That’s a word we should get used to boys. Chaos.’⁶

The war had become a grim reality for Australia by February 1942. The Labor Government of John Curtin faced the appalling prospect of a Japanese invasion following the fall of Singapore and the bombing of Darwin. Australia’s Eighth Army Division had been destroyed and 22 000 Australian troops had been taken prisoner. The country was in a state of alarm verging on panic. Ironically it fell to Curtin, who had never completely shed his pacifist, anti-conscription convictions, to intensify his nation’s identification with the Allied war effort and boost morale on the home front. Professor A. P. Elkin of the Anthropology Department at Sydney University bombarded Curtin with proposals for the establishment of a Department of Morale under Elkin’s direction. Conlon also had an interest in massaging the community morale, although in his scheme of things there was no place for Elkin; he was yesterday’s man. Curiously, Conlon won the day and it was to Sydney University’s Manpower Officer and not to its Professor of Anthropology that the Prime Minister turned, in March 1942, for a report on the problem of morale, giving Conlon the opportunity to secure a key role for himself in wartime policy.

Throughout March and April, Conlon was engaged in feverish activity in Canberra, Sydney and Melbourne, ‘carrying on a single-handed struggle to establish myself in the hierarchy’, as he told his friends at Ushers.⁷ When Conlon was duly appointed to chair the Prime Minister’s Morale Committee, he hand picked its members from among his personal allies: Alan Stout, ‘Panzee’ Wright and Ian Hogbin, with Julius Stone as deputy chair. Elkin was pointedly ignored. Under Conlon’s verbose guidance, the Morale Committee held a two-day meeting in June to discuss such weighty matters as a campaign to turn suburban gardens into vegetable plots to offset the loss of workers, and the negative attitude of housewives. Towards the end of the second day, Conlon mused: ‘If we could think of another name for information we could get a new department.’ Money for staff and resources would not be a problem, he said.⁸ Northern Australia was seen to be vulnerable to the twin evils of Japanese spies and American soldiers, so Ian Hogbin and Panzee Wright were dispatched to report on the particular problems of morale in north Queensland. Another two-day meeting in July got down to more substantial issues, especially Conlon’s notion that there should be a strong national body to influence the Federal Government on education policy. A subcommittee was established to make recommendations. A research committee was also established. A paid consultant

6 Horne, *The Education of Young Donald*, p. 283.

7 Conlon to Stone, 11 April 1942, Stone Papers, National Library of Australia [hereinafter NLA], MS 5516.

8 NAA, 1608/1, item AK 29/1/2.

was necessary for this committee, Conlon insisted, and he arranged for his brilliant friend Jim McAuley to get the job. In December the committee coopted several more of Conlon's allies: John Kerr as well as 'Nugget' Coombs and Brian Fitzpatrick from the new Department of Post-War Reconstruction.

Having a special project from the Prime Minister did wonders for Conlon's aura. Brian Fitzpatrick enjoyed drinking with Alf, yet he always had an uneasy feeling that the Prime Minister's Press Secretary was probably desperately paging somewhere for Conlon: *"Are you there? Won't you come? Jack wants to see you. When can you come?"* One had this feeling because Alf didn't pretend to be the great panjandrum and the backroom boy, that he was.⁹ His friends at Sydney University thought so, too. The rumour mill had it that his next move was to a top job in the Army.

It is doubtful that Conlon did have a great deal of influence with Curtin. There is not a jot of real evidence for it, even though numerous historians have looked. It probably required just a few minutes of Curtin's time to agree to Conlon's idea about a committee to consider morale, if only to get rid of him. The official war historian, Paul Hasluck—who loathed Conlon—examined all the documents he could locate and could find no evidence that the Morale Committee had any influence on the Prime Minister or that its members were effectively in touch with him.¹⁰ Conlon did call on the Prime Minister in December 1942 to discuss his proposals. Curtin seems to have been bemused and alarmed by Alf's grandiose ideas for creating a Department of Public Relations, responsible to the Prime Minister and costing £2 million, and referred the idea to Arthur Caldwell who proved the death knell for the idea.¹¹ Conlon's one claim to success was the establishment of the Commonwealth Department of Education, with his staunch ally Richard Mills as its first director, although the direct impetus for this move came from Nugget Coombs in his capacity as Director-General of Post-War Reconstruction. Otherwise the Morale Committee's recommendations proved to be something of a dead end for Conlon's ambitions. No matter. Alf always had other fish to fry, having managed to persuade General Stantke to establish a research section at Victoria Barracks LHQ, Melbourne, with himself appointed as a major on the special list. Whatever it was Conlon was doing in Melbourne, he wanted it kept hush-hush, giving his friends to understand it was TOP SECRET. He had been able to second a number of ex-academics and lawyers from other army units and had set them the task of working out a plan for the northern regions of Australia in the event of invasion. His team included

9 Brian Fitzpatrick, in Thompson, *Alfred Conlon*, p. 7.

10 Paul Hasluck to J. W. Burton, 16 August 1967, from the private papers of Nicholas Hasluck.

11 Curtin to Conlon, 11 March 1943, NAA, A1607/1, item AK 29/1/2.

John Andrews, a geographer, cartographer Edgar Ford and lawyer Frank Hutley. In addition, he had contrived the transfer of two Fort Street old boys, John Kerr and John Ryan. These two were to become his right-hand men.

Even so, early in 1943, when General Lloyd succeeded Stantke as Adjutant-General, Conlon's outfit looked very shaky. Lloyd could not abide Conlon and thought his research unit a lot of nonsense; he was determined to be rid of it. Staff were whittled away. Conlon made a characteristic countermove and got a friend to introduce him to Brigadier Eugene Gorman, a close friend of the Commander-in-Chief, General Thomas Blamey. Over a few drinks, Conlon put it to Gorman that what Blamey needed was a special intelligence unit to help him deal with the non-orthodox problems of the Army, such as the administration of occupied areas. In February 1943, Conlon's group was transferred to the Directorate of Military Intelligence, LHQ, where they occupied an old weatherboard building known as L Block, beside the Victoria Barracks in St Kilda Road.

By the time the year was out, everyone in Conlon's outfit had been given a considerable leg-up by General Blamey. The story of how this happened has become the centrepiece of the Conlon legend—more parts myth than fact. It is said that the battle-hardened, no-nonsense Commander-in-Chief, just back from the war zone, paid a visit to the research unit and gruffly demanded an explanation of what it was they actually did. Alf replied—so some versions of the story go—'We just bugger about.' In other versions, Conlon, feet on desk, scratching his bum with his pipe, gives a rather more blunt response: 'Fuck all.' Again, the Conlon magnetism worked. On 6 October 1943, the unit was transformed into the Directorate of Research and made responsible directly to Blamey himself. The directorate had no actual establishment; staff were appointed on the Commander-in-Chief's special list, at Conlon's discretion. Whatever it was that Conlon did say—and it seems Alf went to see the General rather than the other way about—it reinforced Blamey's own view that as the Australian head of the armed forces, not just as an appendage of the British, he had a historic and politically sensitive role. Moreover, Conlon's ideas spoke directly to Blamey's belief that Australia must have a key role in the Pacific once the Japanese had been driven out. Where the other army brass regarded Conlon as a nuisance and a fraud, Blamey could see his usefulness. Always vulnerable to criticism and intrigue, Blamey saw the benefit of having a sort of intelligence unit on the margins of the military to assist him to deal with civil and political issues.¹² The directorate was to be his eyes and ears and its charter was vague and broad. Major Conlon could do pretty well what he liked, as long as General Blarney could reap a benefit.

¹² See John Hetherington, *Blamey, Controversial Soldier: A biography of Field Marshal Sir Thomas Blamey...* (Canberra, 1954); Gavan Long, *The Final Campaigns* (Canberra, 1963).

In January 1944, Lieutenant Colonel Julius Stone was brought into the directorate full-time for what he explained to a Harvard colleague were '[s]pecial duties of an expert and secret nature'.¹³ Professor Keith Murray, an agriculturalist recruited from Queensland University, already held the rank of a full colonel. Other lieutenant colonels appointed were Professor Keith Isles, an economist from Adelaide University, and the anthropologists Ian Hogbin and Camilla Wedgwood from Sydney University. Not to be outranked by his subordinates, Conlon was promoted to lieutenant colonel. Bill Stanner was unwillingly drafted into the position of assistant director of research. It says much for Conlon's pulling power that he could compel the transfer of Stanner, who had been the advisor to the Minister for the Army and had developed the remarkable North Australia Observer Unit as a bush commando unit on the front line of defence in the Northern Territory. It was a move Conlon might well have come to regret. Stanner was a man of considerable experience, a few years older than Alf, and he already held the rank of lieutenant colonel. He never was beguiled by the Conlon charisma.

This rash of highly placed appointments was a direct result of Conlon's trips to New Guinea with Blamey towards the end of 1943. Blamey had encountered serious trouble in his command in New Guinea just as the campaign against the Japanese was at a precarious point, with desperate fighting on the Kokoda trail across the Owen Stanley Range. General Douglas MacArthur, as the Supreme Allied Commander in the Pacific, had pressured Curtin to send Blamey to New Guinea to take control—a move that had resulted in a confrontation with Major General Rowell, the commander of the New Guinea force. Rowell had a longstanding antipathy to Blamey, whom he saw as debauched and unstable; Blamey had him removed. With no shortage of politicians and military officers looking for Blamey's head, he needed Conlon's help to ensure his command would be judged a success.

As the Japanese retreated in the final months of 1943, the whole of New Guinea had come under the control of the Australian New Guinea Administrative Unit (ANGAU). Conlon saw his opportunity to be the architect of a 'New Deal' for Australia's colonial territories and moved swiftly to establish his unit as the policy arm of ANGAU. In February 1944, Blamey presented a verbose paper, written by Conlon, to alert the Government to the 'tremendous political vistas' presented in the Pacific and the need for imagination, insight and ingenuity. The paper argued that with the Japanese all but defeated in the South-West Pacific, the Australian Government was strategically placed to seize the initiative to influence the future activities of the United States and other imperial powers in the Pacific basin, as well as commercial development in the region. The war had

13 Star, *Julius Stone*, p. 75.

given Australia a unique opportunity to exercise a moral policy as a justified weapon of power politics to protect not only the future of native people in the Pacific but also the strategic security of Australia:

It may be we are confronted with one of those rare moments in history where morality coincided with expediency. The strategic importance of New Guinea could not be overstated in the chain of islands from Timor to the Solomon's [sic] and New Caledonia which were the forward line of defence for Australia. The reoccupation and military administration of New Guinea must be approached as a critical phase in Australia's colonial policy.¹⁴

The paper hinted at a colonial policy that included more than the territories of Papua and New Guinea at a time when colonial expansion for Australia was in the air. H. V. (Bert) Evatt, the Minister for External Affairs, had made no secret of his ambition to secure a security zone in the South-West Pacific and had consistently identified Dutch New Guinea, Timor, the Solomons and New Caledonia as areas that Australia should be given to administer following liberation from the Japanese. US President Franklin Roosevelt had indicated to the Pacific War Council in February 1943 that there should be a redistribution of sovereignty in the Pacific and he had raised the possibility of Australia taking over responsibility for Portuguese Timor. The idea of Australia and New Zealand being given postwar control of both French and British Pacific possessions was mooted again at the Pacific War Council in January 1944.¹⁵

Conlon was convinced that preparing the ground for a radical and expanded postwar colonial policy was the job of his Directorate of Research. Everyone was set to reading some aspect of colonisation and the Pacific. Ida Leeson, recruited from the Mitchell Library through the good offices of Julius Stone, was given the rank of major and the task of rapidly building a research library. Orders were placed for close to 200 books on criminology, sociology, colonial policy, anthropology, philosophy, international law, administration and labour, as well as copies of all journals on Africa, Oceania, Asia and the Pacific. Any book the staff wanted, Leeson would try to get. Jim McAuley, for whom reading was a consuming passion, could not have been more delighted, since Alf's research brief dovetailed nicely with his burgeoning interest in aesthetics and the philosophy of Asia. Hal Stewart was as happy as a sand-boy in his job as the librarian's assistant.

On one idle afternoon in October 1943 when Corporal Stewart and Lieutenant McAuley found they had L Block to themselves, they hit upon the idea of constructing some hoax surrealist poems that they would pass off on their

14 The Situation of Australian Colonies as at January 1944, NAA, CP637, item 45.

15 See Richard Hall, *The Real John Kerr: His brilliant career* (Sydney, 1978), p. 57.

literary *bête noire*, Max Harris, as the work of an unknown, deceased poet, Ern Malley.¹⁶ The whole collection was called *The Darkening Ecliptic* and carried an epigraph of 'an old proverb' that they concocted: 'Do not speak of secret matters in fields full of little hills.'

Directorate colleagues were given a reading. Conlon was absolutely delighted. Ian Hogbin and Camilla Wedgwood expressed surprise that the Malley oeuvre had taken only an afternoon to write and set themselves the task of duplicating the experiment. As Stewart recalled, they had no difficulty whatsoever in producing as many poems 'of a very much higher quality than ours in rather less time'.¹⁷ Kerr gave sage legal advice not to accept any money for publication of this fake drivel and suggested that they could invite an important public figure to write a preface to the book.¹⁸ Conlon, with his 'no hands approach to life', had the idea to involve Bert Evatt, the Minister for External Affairs and Attorney-General.

The atmosphere of heady tomfoolery generated by the Malley hoax seems to have infected most of the directorate with fanciful ideas. Not content merely to subvert colonial policy, Conlon had notions that postwar policy for Australia was also grist for his mill. A draft paper from Julius Stone proposed a series of huge research projects that touched on every conceivable aspect of domestic and foreign policy. In just some of Stone's proposals, Isles was to investigate industrial and agricultural capacity, the role of economic collaboration with the United States and the implications of US involvement in the Pacific; Conlon was to elaborate questions of stability and instability of postwar government policy, strategic and imperial policy towards the United States and ties with Britain; Kerr was directed to the constitutional issues of defence and other strategic aspects, as well as the relationship between the bureaucracy and government and manpower allocation; Stanner was to overview the colonial issue in terms of its obligations and commitments, economic capacity, manpower requirements and policy imperatives. And this was only the tip of the policy iceberg; there was plenty more.

Stanner, the outsider within Conlon's empire, responded as if it were another hoax, calling it 'a gargantuan essay in quantitative colossalism which out-Conlons Conlon'. With contemptuous ridicule, he dismissed Stone's project as fantasy, which illustrated 'the increasing erectility of the Directorate's libido...likely to afford equal assistance to the bounding megalomaniacs or the melancholias between which we now alternate'. Stanner felt that the sooner Stone was returned to the officer reserve the better. 'I am now strongly anti-

16 For a full account of the Ern Malley hoax, see Michael Heyward, *The Ern Malley Affair* (St Lucia, Qld, 1993).

17 Harold Stewart, quoted in *ibid.*, p. 100.

18 John Kerr, *Matters for Judgement: An autobiography* (Melbourne, 1978), p. 11.

Semitic', he concluded.¹⁹ There was no love lost between Conlon and his acerbic assistant director. To Stanner's relief, Stone returned to his university duties in February 1944 and his grand plan languished for want of Alf's attention.

Conlon was determinedly pursuing his own radical plans for Australia's territories, which he was not about to let fall back into the hands of the old planters and colonial administrators. He wanted new policies in place that emphasised native welfare, as well as Australia's strategic interests, and he saw it as his job to create a new generation of enlightened administrators. Reg Halligan, the unimaginative head of the Department of Territories, found himself out-manoeuvred, with his minister, Eddie Ward, completely seduced by Conlon's vision of a 'New Deal' for New Guinea.²⁰ Now Conlon had two powerful patrons in Blamey and Ward. As these men did not see eye to eye, it was one of Conlon's roles to act as a conduit of information between them, further enhancing his power and greatly increasing the enmity directed towards him from within the Army and from the bureaucrats in Canberra.

Eddie Ward was a pugnacious, old-style labour man with a foul tongue and a reputation as a radical firebrand, for whom colonialism was an anathema. Curtin disliked Ward, who had been foisted on his Cabinet by the Caucus, and the territories portfolio was his way of repaying Ward for his disloyalty. As expected, Ward found this portfolio an embarrassment. He was disinclined to take the advice of Reg Halligan, nor was he inclined to take the readily proffered advice of Professor Elkin, whose policy of compromise and restraint had no appeal. Instead, he turned to Conlon to deliver a policy that would redeem the portfolio from the stigma of colonial exploitation. Halligan and Conlon were meant to work closely together; they did not. As far as Alf was concerned, Reg Halligan would not have recognised a good idea if it were held out to him on a fork.

In mid-April 1944, Conlon and two senior officers in the directorate had accompanied Ward on a tour of Papua and New Guinea where the ANGAU top brass was openly annoyed at what they saw as the directorate's radical meddling in the Army's business. The diary entries of ANGAU officer Eddie Stanton give a flavour of the general opinion on this subject. Like the settler community, he was outraged at the idea that indigenous workers were going to be paid compensation, 'as if we, the white man, owe the natives anything'. And again, specifically concerning Hogbin: 'He advocates that natives are our equals and that we should regard them as our brothers, and do everything in our power to elevate them.' Hogbin was seen as the driving force behind the push for compensation and concern for indigenous welfare. His homosexuality did not

19 Notes and Correspondence, March 1944, Stone Papers, NLA, MS 5516.

20 NAA, CP 637/1.

escape comment. 'He likes native boys', Stanton pointedly observed.²¹ As far as most in ANGAU and the settler community were concerned there was too much bleeding-heart anthropology in the directorate and altogether too much Conlon everywhere.

Conlon's other powerful patron, General Blamey, needed help to advance his ambitious plan for regional security, which sought a much more potent role for Australia in the Asia-Pacific region. How much Blamey's vision of Australia as the dominant power in the postwar Pacific was a product of the fevered enthusiasm of the directorate, and how much was his own idea, it is hard to tell, but the Commander-in-Chief received determined support in the directorate. The whole thrust of their activity was to provide a radically new approach that would sweep away the exploitative colonial system of the past and establish structures and policies to facilitate the process of self-government, as sketched in Hogbin and Wedgwood's book *Development and Welfare in the Western Pacific*, published in 1943, which argued that Australia's obligations to the people of its Pacific territories could be honoured 'only if we abandon all thought of developing the region ourselves and train the islanders to do so'.²²

Conlon had suspicions that the bureaucrats in Ward's department were sympathetic to the return of civil government in the territories, since this would hand control of administration back to them. Here Conlon was able to use his close relationship with the Commander-in-Chief, getting Blamey to persuade the Prime Minister that General MacArthur wanted ANGAU to remain in control of New Guinea. He knew that Curtin would defer to MacArthur's wishes, even when it was against his own judgment and advice.²³ Conlon also fought a determined campaign against the Department of External Territories to make sure that all applications for re-entry to areas under Australian Army control be referred to the directorate for action, so that he controlled the movements of civilians to the South-West Pacific, as well as to Malaya, Borneo and the Dutch possessions. Even the Rajah of Sarawak had to get Conlon's permission to visit his own country.²⁴ Throughout 1944 Conlon was running lines of interference on many different fronts. In April 1944 he had dispatched Bill Stanner to London, to precede Blamey in talks associated with the Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Conference. Since Conlon did not trust Stanner to see things his way, he also sent John Kerr to keep watch and to use his own initiative, if need be.

21 Hank Nelson (ed.), *The War Diaries of Eddie Stanton: Papua New, 1942–45, New Guinea, 1945–1946* (Sydney, 1996), pp. 269, 275–6.

22 Ian Hogbin and Camilla Wedgwood, *Development and Welfare in the Western Pacific* (Sydney, 1943), pp. 2–3.

23 Curtin to Ward, 31 October 1944, NAA, A518/1, item A800/1/7.

24 NAA, MP742, items 274/1/249 and 274/1/247.

Among the top-secret reports that Conlon received from his emissaries in London was Stanner's report on the high-powered Social Sciences Research Committee in the Colonial Office.²⁵ This was just the kind of thing Conlon was looking for: a process to mastermind progressive policy in Papua and New Guinea after the war. By September 1944, he had got Eddie Ward to secure the agreement of the War Cabinet to the establishment of an External Territories Research Council, chaired by Conlon. The members made a familiar roll call of his friends: Richard Mills, Panzee Wright, Keith Isles, Keith Murray and Camilla Wedgwood, as well as Nugget Coombs representing the Department of Post-War Reconstruction; it had functions so broad and ill-defined they would make any bureaucrat blanch.²⁶

The External Territories Research Council was only one element in Conlon's grand plan to redesign the intellectual landscape of postwar Australia. Back in 1943 Conlon had floated with Richard Mills of the Universities Commission the prospect of setting up a special research council. Conlon had been keen to impress upon his old friend that tertiary education failed to give weight to 'what might be called Australia's strategic position' and that the emerging intelligentsia lacked the knowledge base for an appreciation of Australia's position in the Pacific; he proposed a research committee to attempt to redress those limitations.²⁷ The compliant Mills agreed to be a nominal chair, as long as he did not have to do anything.²⁸ In a characteristic move, Conlon then got Julius Stone to propose that the Australian National Research Council set up the Social Sciences Research Committee to be chaired by Richard Mills. By the time the first meeting convened, this group had expanded to include Alf Conlon, Panzee Wright, Nugget Coombs and Keith Isles.²⁹

As with every project of Conlon's devising, here much of the work was done informally in late-night drinking sessions in Melbourne. Panzee Wright remembers one such session in the middle of 1944 when he and Alf were speculating about what might happen after the war if the northern hemisphere was really wrecked. 'Why shouldn't Australia be ready to be the new Constantinople?' they asked themselves. They devised a plan to 'put up a new university and put it in the front garden of the Commonwealth government and try and staff it with people of such eminence that when they asked for six million the government would have to take it seriously'. Then and there they

25 NAA, MO729/8, item 49/439/73; see also Geoffrey Gray, 'Managing the Impact of War: Australian anthropology and the South West Pacific', in Roy M. McLeod (ed.), *Science and the Pacific War: Science and survival in the Pacific, 1939–1945* (Dordrecht, 2000), pp. 187–210.

26 NAA, A518, item R815/1/1.

27 Conlon to R. C. Mills, 25 October 1943, NAA, A1608/1.

28 Stout Papers, University of Sydney Archives, p. 180, item 210; also the correspondence in relation to the Social Sciences Research Committee in the Wright Papers, University of Melbourne Archives, A.1968.0003.

29 Australian National Research Council Papers, NLA, MS 482, box 24; Stuart Macintyre, *The Poor Relation: A history of social sciences in Australia* (Melbourne, 2010), pp. 48–9.

drafted a proposal for such an institution, which would attract back to Australia its outstanding intellectual expatriates. Next morning the proposal was with General Blamey, who enthusiastically undertook to persuade the Prime Minister to the idea. Central to the concept was a world-class medical research institute. And who better to head it up than Howard Florey, whom Blamey was able to persuade to make a special visit to Australia in September 1944, ostensibly to discuss the latest developments in penicillin. It was Conlon who met Florey when he arrived in Adelaide and briefed him while they travelled to Melbourne for further discussions with Blamey. The following year, when negotiations with Florey began in earnest, Conlon was the go-between.³⁰

The School of Civil Affairs was prompted by another top-secret report leaked from London, about a similar set-up in Whitehall. Conlon's plan in the short term was to put together a training course in civil affairs for personnel in areas liberated from the Japanese. When the war was over, the grand plan was to make this an Institute of Colonial Studies like the one at Oxford, which would become one of the institutes at the new national university. He was determined to cut out Professor Elkin, whose department at Sydney University had traditionally trained men for colonial administration. With his own anthropologists on staff, Conlon was able to tap excellent networks for training materials and personnel. Camilla Wedgwood obtained a prospectus detailing courses for training in colonial administration from Margaret Mead, and Ian Hogbin arranged for Ralph Piddington—yet another anthropologist antipathetic to Elkin—to be brought out from the University of Aberdeen to the directorate.³¹ In early January 1945, Lucy Mair, who was an expert in colonial administration in Africa, was brought out from the London School of Economics (LSE).

The next move was to persuade the War Cabinet subcommittee to provide funding for a School of Civil Affairs in Canberra. At the War Cabinet meetings, Blamey did the talking, but Conlon was invariably present at his elbow. By September 1944, the skeleton of the School of Civil Affairs was in place: Keith Murray was the principal, with Ralph Piddington as his deputy and Ian Hogbin, Camilla Wedgwood, John Andrews, John Legge and Jim McAuley as the lecturing staff. The absence of the directorate's other anthropologist, Bill Stanner, was notable. Conlon was unconcerned about Stanner, for whom he had other plans, and he continued to make high-ranking appointments of academics, lawyers and other persons whose skills he needed. Since there was nothing in the military to compare even remotely with the Directorate of Research, it attracted rancour from within the military and from without. It was not just that the directorate did not hold parades, or that its staff would not salute and wore their uniforms askew; what really infuriated was the high elevation of their ranks. There was

30 The correspondence is in the Florey Papers, Parcel 10/11, Australian National University Library.

31 Margaret Mead to Camilla Wedgwood, 15 August 1944, Wedgwood Papers, NLA, MS 483.

no war establishment for the directorate and appointments were made on the Commander-in-Chief's special list. According to Wing-Commander White, who raised the matter in Parliament in September 1944, among the 24 officers in the directorate, nine of whom were colonels, there was not an overseas service stripe or a wound to be seen. White's fulminations against this 'excrescence' greatly annoyed the Minister for the Army, Frank Forde, who did not appreciate having to defend this bunch of oddballs in the Parliament. The attack also made Conlon alert to the advantages of recruiting men with overseas service or wound stripes. When Peter Ryan, a sergeant who had distinguished himself in combat in New Guinea, presented himself at the directorate, Alf took him on immediately. Ryan recalls that he was one of four new recruits to the directorate at that time, each of whom had distinguished overseas service. For a few weeks, he had 'no duties whatsoever' and then Conlon directed him to a pile of books to read on history and colonial policy. He read diligently and in no time was promoted to the rank of lieutenant as an instructor at the School of Civil Affairs. His job was to teach Pidgin.³²

Jim McAuley was promoted to captain and his job was as instructor in colonial administration—not that he really knew anything about colonial administration. None of them did. Hogbin, Wedgwood and Piddington gave instruction in aspects of anthropology and Andrews taught geography. The teaching ratio was one staff for every two students. Professor Elkin was quick to see the negative implications for his anthropology department. 'If this kind of set up remains after the war', he bitterly complained to a colleague, 'then the age of miracles has arrived'.³³

Blamey had approved £10 000 from the Army budget for permanent premises for the school on a site chosen by Conlon within the grounds of the proposed national university, but in the short term they used facilities at Duntroon. The behaviour of both staff and students was, however, decidedly unmilitary. Ralph Piddington had a serious drinking problem, and sometimes on parade he was too drunk to stand. Almost immediately there was conflict over the refusal of the directorate officers to recognise the authority of the commanding officer at Duntroon. Soon they were banned from that site with nowhere to go.³⁴ In June 1945, Conlon was desperately trying to negotiate a new home for the next training intake, at the same time as he was establishing a radical new policy for the administration of Australia's Pacific territories, including an ambitious

32 Peter Ryan, in Thompson, *Alfred Conlon*, p. 19.

33 Quoted in Tigger Wise, A. P. Elkin: *The self-made anthropologist* (Sydney, 1985), p. 160.

34 NAA, MP742, item 323/21/27.

legal project to consolidate the legal systems of Papua and New Guinea. Simultaneously, he was getting into terrible hot water over a lunatic project to control the civil administration of British colonies in Borneo.³⁵

As the commander of the armed forces in Borneo, Blamey was in a strong position and he was not a man to show deference to the British. He insisted that Conlon was to control civil affairs in Borneo or the Australians would withdraw all support.³⁶ In April 1945, Blamey bluntly informed the British Colonial Office that the civil affairs unit they had detached to Australia, including a former chief justice and deputy governor of North Borneo, was unsuitable and an ANGAU senior officer was ordered to the directorate to raise a detachment for Borneo. When the forward party of British officers arrived in Australia, they found that an Australian unit, the British Borneo Civil Affairs Unit (BBCAU)—known colloquially as the Bastards, Bludgers, Cunts and Arseholes Unit—had been created to do the job in Borneo in their stead. To their fury, the British officers found themselves confined to Ingleburn Barracks while a rookie Australian unit was dispatched to Borneo. They were incensed at being placed under the command of an Australian officer and even more outraged to be told the authority of the Colonial Office would not be recognised. They sent complaints back to London that Conlon was unpredictable, power-hungry and unreasonable. There was talk of mounting a formal complaint to the Australian Government about the way Conlon was running the show.³⁷

By the middle of 1945 Conlon's chaotic administration had caught up with him. The size of the directorate had blown out fourfold, with 60 staff in the School of Civil Affairs and a further 70 in the directorate. His operation was exposed on several fronts with no clear lines of responsibility. John Curtin was seriously ill and Conlon's political patronage looked increasingly fragile. Ida Leeson observed his great distress when she told him that Curtin had an occlusion: 'He looked most pained and said "Don't say that Ida, don't say it. Don't say the word", because he thought it might mean the end of their planning if Curtin died.'³⁸ On the ground in Borneo, the civil affairs situation was disastrous. The forward BBCAU party had arrived on 30 April, hopelessly understaffed, without unit stores, equipment or transport, and with no knowledge of the nature and area of the impending operation except that it was to be in British Borneo.³⁹ The despairing commanding officer begged to have the British personnel released to join the unit, but at the end of June there were still 40 British officers penned up at Ingleburn.

35 NAA, MP742, item 274/1/246.

36 NAA, MP742, item 274/1/246.

37 Kerr, *Matters in Judgement*, p. 103.

38 Ida Leeson, in Thompson, *Alfred Conlon*, p. 14.

39 Long, *The Final Campaigns*, p. 403.

The notion of Australia holding on to British Borneo was lunatic, for any number of reasons, but Conlon's plan had a certain logic. If Australia was able to secure control of North Borneo then it would be in a position to trade territory with the Dutch: North Borneo for Dutch New Guinea. Evatt had already tried to negotiate Australian postwar control over the Dutch colonies in New Guinea and Timor, which were central to his and Blamey's concept of Australia's postwar regional security. Conlon confidently expected another 18 months of war, with MacArthur's forces driving the Japanese back, island by island. This would give him the necessary time to put in place new administrative and legal structures in New Guinea and, perhaps, to negotiate with the Dutch. As the expert on Dutch New Guinea, John Legge was very aware of Conlon's desire to see New Guinea united under one administration. He felt that by the middle of 1945 Alf was 'alive to the issue of a possible trade with Dutch Borneo'.⁴⁰ That said, it was highly unlikely that Prime Minister Curtin would ever have entertained the idea of holding on to Borneo, for all his loyalty to Blamey. As it was, Curtin was out of action. In his place, Frank Forde was acting as Prime Minister. Forde could not stand Blamey and despised Conlon. When Curtin died on 5 July 1945, Conlon's schemes stood absolutely no chance.

Following Curtin's death, Forde immediately ordered an investigation into the directorate. On 25 July, Conlon was requested to supply the Chief of the General Staff with a list of his staff and an outline of their duties and responsibilities. He did not comply with this request. The War Establishment Committee continued to press the directorate for information, reporting with some exasperation that 'the Director is absent and there appears to be no deputy'; various officers were signing memos for Conlon but he was not in evidence.⁴¹ At the School of Civil Affairs they were disturbed by Conlon's state of mind. McAuley had been concerned for some time that Alf had 'lost control of himself and was courting disaster...the magic touch had gone, the spellbinding powers and the operational judgment'.⁴² He had been aware of some clandestine activity over Borneo, but he was not aware how serious it was until he began to hear rumours from England that Conlon 'had fallen foul of the Colonial Office'.⁴³ It was now too late to do anything to help. Alf was no longer functioning in any coherent way. On 15 August, the War Establishment Committee reported that Lieutenant Colonel Conlon had been admitted to hospital. It seems he had suffered some kind of nervous breakdown. Knives were being sharpened all over town.

Conlon never returned to his position at the directorate. The atomic bombs that were dropped on Japan early in August put the finishing touch to his

40 John Legge, correspondence with the author.

41 NAA, MP742, item 1/1/1808.

42 James McAuley, 'John Kerr's Judgement', *Quadrant*, 20:1 (1976), p. 26.

43 James McAuley, Interview with Catherine Santamaria, 5–7 May 1976, Oral History Collection, NLA, TRC 576.

plans. General Blamey travelled to Tokyo Bay to sign the surrender document on behalf of Australia—a token gesture, since the Australian Government had been basically ignored when the surrender terms had been formulated. Blamey made it clear he would step down immediately when he returned. Conlon, discharged from hospital, drafted the letter of resignation. The Commander-in-Chief considered that his job was done and did not wish to continue under a prime minister who did not have complete confidence in him. The new Prime Minister, Ben Chifley, did not, however, accept the resignation, indicating that he wished to retain Blamey to deal with the complexity of the immediate postwar period. The Commander-in-Chief was thus able to repay his debt of gratitude by promoting Alf Conlon to the rank of full colonel. He was placed on the regimental supernumerary list on 14 September.

On 19 September, the Minister for the Army fielded a barrage of questions in Parliament about Conlon and his organisation. The honourable members demanded to know the exact situation with the Directorate of Research—described as an organisation that had ‘inquired into everything in Heaven and on earth’, under the command of someone who was ‘in civil life a third year medical student’, who had recently been seen in Canberra ‘wearing the full uniform of a staff Colonel’. Surely, they demanded of the minister, this unit of ‘highly paid professors disguised as temporary Lieut-Colonels and Majors’ was a luxury the taxpayers should be rid of.⁴⁴

Forde was furious. He had anticipated questions about the directorate and was ready to report that it was being rapidly dismantled. He was unaware that Conlon had become a colonel. No-one seemed able to account for it. Forde determined to have the promotion rescinded and wrote Blamey a strong letter to that effect. The Commander-in-Chief replied on 14 November with three closely typed pages of wounded invective in typical Conlon-esque prose, claiming that the minister's demand to rescind the promotion was

a gratuitous insult to an officer who has served with selfless devotion... No officer had a better record of understanding and pioneering effort in the development of a sound administrative approach to difficult problems derived from some of the novel circumstances of modern warfare...he possesses imagination, tenacity and administrative skill considerably beyond the ordinary. This was manifest in advice and assistance in problems of mobilization and in introducing scientific services into the Australian Army.⁴⁵

Conlon kept his rank as a colonel. His services were never again sought by the Army or anybody else with any real power in the postwar world. He was

44 Abbott, in *Hansard*, 19 September 1945.

45 Blamey to Forde, 14 November 1945, NAA, MP742, item 1/1/1808.

cut out of the planning for The Australian National University. Donald Horne recalled an afternoon and evening he spent drinking with Conlon at the Hotel Canberra in 1945. Into the early hours of morning the drinking continued, creating a scene rich in ironic symbolism with Horne, incapable of coherent speech, grunting the odd sceptical aside and Alf still holding forth about the need for Australian foreign policy even as he was 'staggering in the shadows'.⁴⁶

Kerr remained principal of the Australian School of Pacific Administration (ASOPA) but resented Alf's trickery in holding back his career at the Bar; finally, in 1948, he resigned, leaving the position open for Alf. It was not welcomed by all and many predicted it would be disastrous. It was, with his old friend Jim McAuley leading the charge to oust him. Alf turned his attention to completing his medical degree, finally graduating in 1951. He was not suited to general practice and set himself up as a psychiatrist, but his ramshackle lifestyle and lack of concern for his own general health caught up with him and he died prematurely in his own home, aged fifty-three.

46 Donald Horne, *Confessions of a New Boy* (Ringwood, 1985), pp. 155–7.