

6. Ronald Murray Berndt: 'Work of national importance'

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A. P. Elkin, who was never slow to seize an opportunity to promote himself and the importance of anthropology, wrote to the Prime Minister, John Curtin, pointing out that problems associated with the administration of 'native peoples' during war could be resolved only through anthropological research. These problems, he added, would increase in number and complexity as a result of the war, especially in northern Australia and Australia's external territories of Papua and New Guinea. Consequently, it was no longer simply a matter of understanding cultural contact, and social organisation, economic life, local customs and religion. It was necessary also to examine the psychological and sociological effects of the war, and of the military administration. The attitudes of the 'natives to the white man and his administration' had to be understood if 'the latter [was] to succeed' once the war had ended. He anticipated an increased role for himself and some of his selected students, two of whom were Ronald Berndt (1916–90) and Catherine Berndt (née Webb) (1918–94). This chapter focuses on the early career of Ronald rather than Catherine; she is no less important at this time but it is Ronald who ends up with a tenured academic career in anthropology. We can say, however, that as their careers took shape Catherine, perhaps putting aside her ambitions, increasingly devoted herself to actively supporting, developing and helping make Ronald's career.

The war enabled Ronald Berndt to develop and establish himself as an anthropologist—something that could not have happened had he not had an exemption from military duty. It was underpinned by his determination and single-mindedness combined with the support of A. P. Elkin. An only child, Ronald was born in Adelaide in 1916. His father was a jeweller and both parents were born in Australia of German descent. His father broke with the Lutheran Church soon after Ronald's birth. Subsequently, Ronald attended Anglican primary schools and did his secondary education at Pulteney Grammar School, Adelaide, leaving at the age of fourteen, and—largely at the request of his father who was concerned that his son might not obtain work during the Depression years—undertook an accountancy course at the South Australian School of Mines and Industry.

At the age of twenty-three, Berndt, Honorary Assistant in Ethnology at the South Australian Museum, was casting round for a way into anthropology. At the urging of T. H. Johnston and J. B. Cleland—both members of the University

of Adelaide Board for Anthropological Research—he wrote to Elkin seeking information on enrolment for the Diploma in Anthropology. This was an ideal entry for Berndt as it did not require matriculation.¹ It was while he was at the University of Sydney that he met his future wife and partner in anthropology, Catherine Helen Webb, a New Zealander who completed her BA at Victoria University College, Wellington, in 1938, and a Certificate of Proficiency in Anthropology at the University of Otago in 1939.

In June 1941, Catherine was funded by the Australian National Research Council (ANRC) to undertake research at Ooldea Soak, SA, where Ronald had visited briefly as member of the University of Adelaide Board for Anthropological Research expedition in August 1939. This research formed the basis of Catherine's thesis—a requirement for the diploma. Elkin had hoped Ronald would also be funded for the Ooldea research—Catherine to 'concentrate on the women and on the linguistics while [Ronald] will work through the men'—but his application was rejected.² Ronald, who had spent the end of 1939 and early 1940 at the Lower River Murray interviewing 'remnants' of the Jaralde (Ngarrindjeri), planned to write his thesis from this research.

When Catherine applied for a permit from the SA Aborigines' Protection Board (APB) to reside at Ooldea Soak, the Commonwealth Investigation Branch (CIB)—the precursor of the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO)—noted that her husband (they were married in April 1941) was already under observation. Being of German descent had brought him to the attention of the authorities following a complaint by his landlord in Sydney. He was visited by the police but they found nothing untoward. It had been alleged that Ronald had stated 'that six of his friends were interned in [South Australia]. Berendt [sic] is supposed to be employed at the University'; that he 'engages himself in his studies in his bedroom and spends a large portion of his time there... He spends all his spare time writing letters in his room'. Berndt denied that he knew any person interned, and informed the officer that both his parents were born in Adelaide, and he would return there at the conclusion of his studies.³

One of the CIB informants considered Ronald a security threat and produced a report based on a mixture of truths, half-truths, hearsay and fabrications. The informant recommended that Ronald (there was little interest in the New Zealand-born Catherine) be prevented from going to Ooldea for the following reasons:

1 R. M. Berndt, Student Record Card, University of Sydney Archives; Minutes, Professorial Board, Arts Faculty, University of Sydney, 16 June 1948, University of Sydney Archives.

2 Elkin to Hon. Sec., ANRC, 2 May 1941, Elkin Papers, University of Sydney Archives [hereinafter EP], 156/4/1/14.

3 Sergeant 3rd Class (Roadley), No. 6 Police Station, North Sydney to Inspector 1/c (Keefe), MPI Section, 29 May 1940, National Archives of Australia, Canberra [hereinafter NAA], C123, 16553.

1. He is decidedly pro-German.
2. He is not a Scientist.
3. He proposes going by motor car at a big expenditure of petrol [at a time of petrol rationing].
4. The trip has been arranged to avoid Military Service.
5. He told a friend that he would not stay at Ooldea but would go further inland.

This was based on evidence—if it can be so considered—such as: when asked whether he was a conscientious objector, Ronald replied, 'Yes and no'. He declined to qualify this statement. Discussing the war with a friend, Berndt said: 'We should not have interfered and fought against Germany.'⁴ He was reported as saying 'that he loathed the Nazis but admired the Hindenburg regime'. It showed that Ronald could be outspoken, indiscreet and inconsistent in his comments about the war. As with most security dossiers, in Ronald's, the often unsubstantiated and unfounded allegations are based on character; in the opinion of an unnamed friend—someone who had known him for a number of years—Ronald Berndt was a

very irresponsible person, childish in many ways. He seems to have deeply resented the fact that his flat was searched in Sydney and when in that city, boasted that he would not take the Oath to serve in the Militia. However he thought better of it and complied with Defence requirements, but the Authorities granted him exemption...from training.⁵

Nonetheless, a permit was issued, primarily as a result of representations by J. B. Cleland (Chairman of the APB), who assured the CIB and the members of the APB that Ronald was 'being assisted by Elkin', and, mistakenly, that Elkin had obtained cash grants for Ronald to cover the cost of the trip. Some days later, Cleland might have had second thoughts about Ronald's loyalty and sincerity:

On the Sunday following the issue of the permit, Professor Cleland invited Berndt and his wife out to tea. After the meal, Berndt offended Professor Cleland's women-folk by bragging that he had avoided military

4 Report by No. 17, in A. C. Palmer (Inquiry Officer, Investigation Branch, Adelaide) to The Inspector, Commonwealth Investigation Branch, Adelaide, 20 June 1941, NAA, D1915/0, SA 19248.

5 Palmer to The Inspector, Commonwealth Investigation Branch, Adelaide, 16 September 1941, NAA, D1915/0, SA 19248. Ronald had enlisted in the Army on 11 September 1940, at the University of Sydney. He had been medically examined and 'found FIT and attested under Part IV of the Defence Act 1903–1939'. He would be 'notified by post of the Unit to which you are allotted and the time, date and place to report for camp'. Certificate of Enrolment, Eastern Command.

training, and would continue to do so. Professor Cleland stated that the female members of his household left the room... Berndt made no disloyal utterances, apart from his statements regarding military training.

After further discussion with Cleland, it was concluded by the Officer-in-Charge of the CIB 'that Berndt will find difficulties in securing further support from the Aborigines' Board'.⁶ It had consequences for their future research.

Once Ronald was at Ooldea—rather than being out of sight and out of mind—further allegations were made against him. He was accused of being 'very friendly with a Rlwy Ganger who is suspected of Anti-British feelings'. It had been 'reported to the Police that Natives smashed two locks on Railway property. Natives had nothing to do with it. Berndt and his ganger pal suspected... Gangers name is not known. [The missionary Harrie Green] knows the full facts. If approached secretly...[he] would assist.'⁷ This information is unlikely to have originated with Green who had earlier informed Cleland

that the trouble over the ganger and the Natives here is a nasty affair. But I can assure you that the root of the trouble is...[the] ganger [who] is definitely opposed to the natives and also the policeman is rough and brutal to them...the natives...highly resent it and told me when he [the policeman] first came here that he would not get on with them if he treated them like that. They said he does not understand us.⁸

Perhaps more worrying for Cleland and the APB was Green's allegation that the Berndts were 'having an unsettling effect upon the natives'. Aboriginal people had spoken to Green

on several occasions and deeply resent [Ronald Berndt's] persistent questionings into matters which concern their tribal life and Secret Customs. Also taking photos of them with no covering at all, representing them to be wild bush Natives in Central Australia and they do not get around like that here at Ooldea.⁹

6 Palmer to The Inspector, Commonwealth Investigation Branch, Adelaide, 20 June 1941, NAA, D1915/0, SA 19248.

7 Palmer to The Inspector, Commonwealth Investigation Branch, Adelaide, 20 June 1941, NAA, D1915/0, SA 19248.

8 Green to J. B. Cleland, 17 July 1941, Cleland Papers, South Australian Museum Archives [hereinafter SAMA], AA60/03. For a brief discussion on the ganger and the policemen, see Cameron Raynes, 'Ooldea, Boxing Day, 1941: Part two', *recordSArchives* [official newsletter of the State Records of South Australia], 23 (November 2002), pp. 4–5.

9 Green to Aborigines' Protection Board (APB), 20 September 1941, State Records of South Australia [hereinafter SRSA], Aborigines' Office, GRG52/1/1941/25. Cf. Ronald Berndt and Catherine Berndt, who stated that there was amongst Aboriginal people at the mission a measure of discontent over the scant rations and poor material resources provided. 'A Preliminary Report of Field Work in the Ooldea Region, Western South Australia', *Oceania*, 12:4 (1942), p. 323.

While he was at Ooldea, Ronald's mother died. She had been 'very ill for some time, and was still so when we left'. She had been misdiagnosed with arthritis¹⁰ and Ronald received a telegram 'asking to come home urgently, at once'. Illustrating his determination, it was his intention to return to Ooldea the next day, 'but as his mother is unlikely to recover, the end being expected any day, he did not feel justified in doing so'. So determined was he to continue his work and not lose the support of Elkin that he asked Catherine to write to Elkin assuring him 'that this will cause minimum of hindrance to his work', that he 'has been working with concentrated energy all day without missing a day since we arrived here. And he means to redouble his efforts on his return.'¹¹ His mother died four days after he returned to Ooldea. He notified Elkin, adding: 'My wife and I are both well, however the weather has been most unpleasant, and now very hot with swarms of flies.'¹² It was a loss that he was unable to discuss in a letter with Elkin.

The Berndts returned to Adelaide at the end of November.¹³ The CIB continued its inquiries into Ronald's activities and, to question his loyalty, sought further information from Green,¹⁴ but he appears not to have replied. The CIB was advised by one of its informants that 'Berndt, to avoid Military training, is now going to Western Australia, where he will apply to the Aborigines Department for a permit to continue his studies on the native areas in that State'.¹⁵ The WA Commissioner for Native Affairs, F. I. Bray, was interviewed by security, 'and [after] a résumé of the circumstances personally conveyed to him...decided to... refuse consent to the issue of a permit'.¹⁶

The Berndts left Adelaide in late December for Dunedin in New Zealand, returning in late March. They used the time to write up their Ooldea research but their future in anthropology was unclear. War service was not out of the question for Ronald but not as a frontline soldier if he could help it. He hoped that, rather than being called up, 'my wife and I would...get to New Guinea in a semi-military capacity...in a position where there would be opportunities to study the natives and carry on anthropological work at the same time'.¹⁷ Once Rabaul was bombed in January 1942, however, the possibility of work in New Guinea ended. Eager to find some anthropologically based war work that

10 Ronald's cancer was also misdiagnosed, which led to his early death. John E. Stanton, Tribute to Ronald M. Berndt, viewed 6 November 2010, <http://www.berndt.uwa.edu.au/generic.lasso?token_value=berndt>

11 C. H. Berndt to Elkin, 6 September 1941, EP, 246/613. Catherine's mother had died the previous year.

12 R. M. Berndt to Elkin, 13 September 1941, EP, 246/613.

13 Penhall to R. M. Berndt, 2 October 1941; R. M. Berndt to Penhall, 18 October 1941, SRSA, GRG52/1/1941/25.

14 Notes: 9a 3 October 1941, No. 17, in R. Williams, Inspector, to H. E. Green, 3 October 1941, NAA, D1915/0, SA 19248.

15 A. C. Palmer (Inquiry Officer, Investigation Branch, Adelaide) to The Inspector, CIB (Adelaide), 17 November 1941, NAA, D1915/0, SA 19248.

16 J. Adams, Inspector (Perth) to The Inspector, CIB (Adelaide), 25 November 1941, NAA, D1915/0, SA 19248.

17 R. M. Berndt to Elkin, 4 December 1941, EP, 246/613.

would enable him to pre-empt being called up for military service, he proposed 'some post, in a semi-military capacity or otherwise, dealing with the natives directly or indirectly in Northern Australia...Catherine is willing to join me in this work if there is a possible opportunity'.¹⁸ At the end of January 1942, Elkin warned them not to get 'too hopeful about getting a position connected with the natives in Northern Australia. There is just a chance that Mr [E. W. P.] Chinnery [Director of the NT Native Affairs Branch] might feel that they can deal with native problems without having anthropological specialists'.¹⁹ Ronald persisted: perhaps 'a departmental position in [Native Affairs] in Sydney or Melbourne, would enable me to do something that was helpful, while Catherine continued with her writing up'.²⁰

Elkin advised Ronald to write directly to the Prime Minister, John Curtin, offering his services, which he did in April 1942. Elkin also wrote to Curtin telling him that when it came to matters of Aboriginal loyalty, anthropologists were the ones able to assist in the 'best use of Aborigines' in the fight against the Japanese; unless Aborigines 'were told to the contrary by [anthropologists] whom they understood and trusted, [the Aborigines] would not see why they should not guide the Japanese'. It was also an opportunity, by allowing the enlistment of Aborigines, to demonstrate that the citizenship 'we talk about is the real thing and not a species of segregation'. He attached two projects, prepared by a 'researcher [Ronald Berndt] working under his supervision'. One project, 'Voluntary War Service for Aborigines', suggested the employment of 'half-castes' in the war effort, specifically to 'form an Aborigines' Corps'. The other was 'Regarding Closer Co-operation and mutual understanding' between 'the white folk and the natives' as a way of ensuring 'a solid and cohesive front against the Japanese'.²¹

Ronald possessed ambition and determination that enabled him to think that his abilities would be recognised, despite no formal academic qualifications or experience in administering Indigenous people. But his main purpose was finding a way to remain in the field whether it be in Australia or New Guinea and fulfil his ambition to be an anthropologist: 'During the last year [1940] I have studied and attended at the Anthropology Course at the Uni. of Syd. hoping thereby to better fit myself for a *lifetime of work in ethnological fields*'.²² Should Elkin not obtain a positive response regarding the two projects that

18 R. M. Berndt to Elkin, 11 January 1942, EP, 246/613.

19 Elkin to R. M. Berndt, 26 January 1942, EP, 246/613.

20 R. M. Berndt to Elkin, 10 February 1942, EP, 246/613.

21 Elkin to Curtin, 2 April 1942, NAA, MP 508/1, 240/701/217. Ronald Berndt was the researcher.

22 [My emphasis.] Ronald M. Berndt to ANRC, 3 March 1941, EP, 160/4/1/78. There are other factors that possibly came into play but which are outside the scope of this chapter, such as the transformation and remaking of the self when in the field. (Ronald was inspired by the main character in Rider Haggard's novels of exotic adventures.) See various chapters in Jean-Guy A. Goulet and Bruce Granville Miller (eds), *Extraordinary Anthropology: Transformations in the field* (Lincoln, Neb., 2007).

Ronald would oversee, or should Ronald not be offered some war work in a 'semi-military capacity', he proposed to inquire into 'the Warburton track'. Ronald hoped to arrange funding, either through the ANRC or the University of Sydney, for he and Catherine to do a survey of desert culture from Ooldea to Warburton, which would take about 12 months.²³ It was an abandoned research project of the University of Adelaide Board for Anthropological Research (which included Ronald as a researcher) that had been granted permission by the WA authorities; nonetheless, after receiving information from the CIB, the WA authorities withdrew the permit for Ronald to enter reserves.

Elkin did not receive a favourable reply from Curtin. Subsequently, most of the latter half of 1942 was spent at Murray Bridge and Adelaide. Ronald continued his work with Albert Karloan and other Jaralde people at the Lower River Murray while Catherine continued to write up the Ooldea material for her thesis, although it had become a joint thesis.²⁴ Over the period 1942–45, their thesis, added to and enlarged (including some rewriting by Elkin), was published in instalments in the journal *Oceania* as 'A Preliminary Report of Field Work in the Ooldea Region, Western South Australia'. Some years later, Elkin described it as the 'best complete monograph' of an Australian tribe.²⁵

While there had been little research on Aboriginal people living in urban and rural Australia before the Pacific War, limited funding for research shifted the interest of Elkin away from northern Australia to south-east Australia.²⁶ Elkin supervised a diverse range of projects. Towards the end of the war, Marie Reay, who had recently completed her degree, undertook research among 'mixed-bloods' in north-western New South Wales at the direction of Elkin and under the auspices of the NSW Aborigines' Welfare Board (AWB), 'which not only appreciated the practical value of her work, but in addition assisted in financial and other ways'.²⁷ Elkin also developed an interest in the assimilation of recent European immigrants to Australia, reflecting Elkin's ambition to include sociology as integral to the department's functions.²⁸ He facilitated research 'into problems connected with the assimilation of alien groups', which was done 'under the

23 R. M. Berndt to Elkin, 17 April 1942, EP, 246/613.

24 Part 1 of their thesis was sent to Elkin in January 1942. R. M. Berndt to Elkin, 28 January 1942, EP, 246/613. It was completed by December 1942, and the Diploma in Anthropology awarded in May 1943.

25 Elkin to Raymond Firth, 13 November 1948, EP, 178/4/2/178.

26 Geoffrey Gray, *A Cautious Silence: The politics of Australian anthropology* (Canberra, 2007), p. 148; Gray, "[The Sydney School] seem[s] to view the Aborigines as forever unchanging": Southeastern Australia and Australian anthropology', *Aboriginal History*, 24 (2000), pp. 176–200.

27 Marie Reay, 'A Half-Caste Aboriginal Community in North-Western New South Wales', *Oceania*, 15:4 (1945), pp. 296–323.

28 A. P. Elkin, *Our Opinions and the National Effort* (Sydney, 1941) was Elkin's first attempt at writing about non-Aboriginal sociology. It was 'based on a survey and analysis of opinions of individuals of the typical and various sections and ages of the community in which the author was assisted by twenty observers mostly graduates in anthropology. The results of the survey were sent in the first instance to the Commonwealth authorities. Amongst other things the book shows the necessity for basing all appeals and calls to the nation

auspices' of the Department of Post-War Reconstruction, the Department of the Interior and the Sydney University Anthropology Department. This research was carried out by Jean Craig (later Martin) and Caroline Tennant Kelly.²⁹ Craig also researched problems associated with rural housing for the Department of Post-War Reconstruction,³⁰ as did Mona Ravenscroft.³¹ Kelly did field research on migrants in Victoria and Queensland.³² Elkin described the work as research of 'a high standard and national importance'.³³

The Berndts were, however, the main recipients of this limited funding. In early February 1943, Elkin wrote to A. J. Gibson, Honorary Secretary of the ANRC, seeking financial assistance for the Berndts. Most of 1942, he informed the ANRC, had been spent working at their 'own expense...doing very careful research amongst the remaining Aborigines [at the Lower River Murray]—checking and adding to work done there 20 years and more ago of Radcliffe-Brown'. These funds were to enable the writing up of their Murray Bridge research and finalising the writing up of their Ooldea research.³⁴ It was for six months, or until such time, if earlier, as the Berndts enter the Commonwealth service³⁵ 'to take charge of a Feeding Station for Aborigines at the Granites, Northn. (sic) Territory'.³⁶ This did not eventuate.

In August 1943, Elkin presented a further grant application on their behalf to the ANRC to do 'field work in South Australia especially in (1) the Adelaide, (2) the Quorn–Maree [sic], (3) Lower Murray and possibly (4) Koonibba–Port Augusta districts, for (a) research on acculturation of aborigines and (b) recording of tribal knowledge provided by remaining members of former tribes in these districts'. Both projects were 'important scientifically, and the former also practically'.³⁷ The ANRC approved at the rate of £200 per annum each, plus a limit of £100 for expenses.³⁸ Elkin also took it upon himself to write to Cleland as Chairman of the APB explaining the Berndts' research project and seeking his as well as the board's support.³⁹

on a knowledge of the various divisions of opinion and the types of reaction which exist.' 'Notes and News', *Oceania*, 12:2 (1941), p. 187. See also A. P. Elkin, 'The Need for Sociological Research in Australia', *Social Horizons* (July 1943), pp. 5–15. See also John Pomeroy's chapter in this volume.

29 'Notes and News', *Oceania*, 14:2 (1943); 15:3 (1945), p. 276; 16:4 (1946), p. 353; 15:3 (1945), p. 276.

30 'Notes and News', *Oceania*, 15:3 (1945), p. 276.

31 Mona Ravenscroft, 'The Housing Problem', *Social Horizons* (July 1943), pp. 48–53.

32 'Notes and News', *Oceania*, 16:4 (1946), p. 353.

33 'Notes and News', *Oceania*, 15:3 (1945), p. 276.

34 Elkin to Hon. Sec., ANRC, 16 February 1943, Records of the Australian National Research Council, National Library of Australia [hereinafter ANRC Records, NLA], MS 482, folder 840 [hereinafter MS482, 840].

35 Hon. Sec., ANRC, to Elkin, 26 February 1943, ANRC Records, NLA, MS 482, 840.

36 Elkin to Hon. Sec., ANRC, 16 February 1943, ANRC Records, NLA, MS 482, 840.

37 Elkin to Hon. Sec., ANRC, 19 August 1943, ANRC Records, NLA, MS 482, 840.

38 Isabel Houison to R. M. Berndt and C. H. Berndt, 13 September 1943, ANRC Records, NLA, MS 482, 840.

39 Elkin to Cleland, 30 September 1943, Cleland Papers, SAMA, AA60/03.

Between September and November 1943, the Berndts undertook two months' research on 'mixed-race' people at Menindee Government Aboriginal Station, where they investigated, for the NSW AWB and supported by ANRC funding, 'the importance of the attitudes and opinions held by the natives themselves in regard to the persons and institutions with whom they come in contact'.⁴⁰ Their aim was to 'supply a general picture of the Aborigines' changing circumstances'. Their research was a mixture of anthropology and sociology focusing on problems of acculturation and relations between 'white folk' and Aboriginal people in urban and rural South Australia. In their opinion, 'the behaviour of white people towards the natives they meet has an inevitable effect on the reactions and attitudes of the natives themselves. Quite often it is the cause of a great deal of trouble.'⁴¹

Their research in Adelaide was 'interesting but depressing, since most of the natives live in the worst part of the town—the slums here are of course not to be compared with those in Sydney, but are still unpleasant as living quarters'.⁴² After Christmas, they planned to travel to Port Augusta immediately,⁴³ but problems with the APB and the CIB continued to hamper them. The board refused to grant a permit to carry out research at Port Augusta, Point Pearce, Point McLeay and Swan Reach Reserves.⁴⁴ On hearing this, Elkin made strong representations on their behalf, informing the board that the Berndts were 'proficient and skilled', 'earnest and sincere' and 'got on very well with the Aborigines'.⁴⁵ Elkin stressed that comparative work like the Berndts' on the 'scientific study of acculturation and assimilation is an essential basis for [enlightened] administration' of Aborigines.⁴⁶ It was all to no avail. Cleland advised Elkin that 'there are likely to be [further] difficulties...in granting permission for the Berndts to enter the reserves'.⁴⁷

The issue of Ronald's military exemption permeated the discussion between Elkin and Cleland and amongst board members. Cleland raised the possibility that anthropological research was a manoeuvre to avoid military service. Elkin addressed this, assuring Cleland that the ANRC was cognisant of such matters. He again underlined the importance of this type of research, telling Cleland it was of 'national importance':

40 R. M. Berndt and C. H. Berndt, A short study of acculturation at Menindee Government Station, Darling River, Typescript, 92 pp + tables and diagrams, maps, Adelaide, 19 November 1943. See also R. M. Berndt, 'Wuradjeri Magic and "clever men"', *Oceania*, 17:4 (1947), pp. 327–65; and 18:1 (1947), pp. 60–86.

41 C. H. Berndt to Houison, 17 October 1943, ANRC Records, NLA, MS 482, folder 857a [hereinafter MS482, 857a].

42 C. H. Berndt to Houison, 16 January 1944, ANRC Records, NLA, MS 482, 840.

43 C. H. Berndt to Houison, 19 December 1943, ANRC Records, NLA, MS 482, 840, 857a.

44 R. M. Berndt to Penhall, 15 November 1943, SRSA, GRG52/1/1940/97.

45 Elkin to APB, 10 November 1943, Cleland Papers, SAMA, AA60/03.

46 Elkin to Cleland, 13 December 1943, EP, 157/4/1/23.

47 Cleland to Elkin, 30 November 1943, Cleland Papers, SAMA, AA60/03.

The question as to whether the Berndts should be doing war work has been considered each time the Executive of the Australian National Research Council has made any grant to them, and the Executive is satisfied and so too is scientific manpower, that in doing the present work, they are contributing towards a solution of a very important present and post-war reconstruction problem. I am sure you can understand why [this] work should be done in South Australia, as well as in New South Wales and Queensland and, of course, the obvious persons to do it in South Australia are the Berndts. They have already done work there and Mr Berndt is a native. [Their research] at one of the Government Settlements [Menindee] in this State was welcomed by the [NSW] Welfare Board, and their report...will prove very helpful. The problem with the more or less civilized aborigines is a very difficult one sociologically and psychologically, and the more detailed and deep analysis of all aspects of the problem, the more hope we have of finding a solution...we need work done on the subject all over Australia and, as Mr Berndt had worked to some extent under your guidance and with your blessing, I thought he should continue the research in South Australia...I would like to emphasize the fact too that this work should be done under the special conditions which arise during wartime, for this will affect their future.⁴⁸

At its meeting on 22 December, the APB deferred consideration of the Berndts' application, 'as many of the natives are not accessible, being engaged in work related to the prosecution of the war, and also on the grounds that the applicants have a disturbing influence on the tranquillity of the natives on the Reserves'.⁴⁹ (Harrie Green's complaint had become an uncontested fact.) Ronald, as requested by the board, provided extra information on the purpose and potential significance of their research, methods and aims, but, at its January meeting, the APB again refused a permit.⁵⁰ Ronald wrote to the board seeking the reasons his application was not approved. Cleland noted that the APB was not required to give reasons for its decisions and directed that Berndt be advised that his letter had been 'received'.⁵¹

The Berndts—not deterred by the obstinacy of the board—left Adelaide for Murray Bridge to continue their research on the Jaralde (Ngarrindjeri) people, also travelling to other parts of South Australia, including the forbidden reserves, by camping near them. In March, they were in Port Augusta, followed by a visit to the Yorke Peninsula.⁵² From there they set out for Ernabella Mission and

48 Elkin to Cleland, 10 November 1943, EP, 157/4/1/23.

49 APB Minutes, 22 December 1943, SRSA, GRG52/16.

50 APB Minutes, 19 January 1944, SRSA, GRG52/16.

51 APB Minutes, 2 December 1943, SRSA, GRG52/16.

52 C. H. Berndt to Houison, 22 March 1944, ANRC Records, NLA, MS 482, 857a.

spent some time at Macumba, 'where some ceremonies were being held; it was very cold camping out in the open but it was well worth while'.⁵³ Overall, the situation in South Australia was untenable, and despite their cheeky forays to the fringes of government and mission reserves, the Berndts were restricted and restrained in their anthropological work in South Australia; they needed to find work outside South Australia. They turned for assistance once more to Elkin, who was approached by the Australian Investment Agency (the Australian arm of Vestey Brothers, a British-based family company), which employed Aboriginal stockmen on its vast tracts of leased pastoral land in northern Australia.⁵⁴

Elkin told J. A. Carrodus, Secretary of the Department of the Interior, that he had 'spent some considerable time with the General Manager of Vesteys [discussing] something of the scheme that [he and Chinnery] are trying to work, namely, to get Vesteys to employ Mr and Mrs Berndt as welfare officers among their Aboriginal employees'. The Berndts would keep an eye on 'conditions of employment, and gradually endeavour to build these up, so that the welfare of the Aborigines and the interests of Vesteys would both be served. Matters of diet and health, increase or decrease of population, and such like would be in their province.' He was pleased that 'after an interview with the Chairman of Directors and the Manager yesterday, the matter seems finalized, at least for the first six months survey'.⁵⁵ This matter had been under discussion since early February.⁵⁶

In May 1944, Elkin wrote to the Berndts informing them of the position with Vesteys, detailing the purpose of the survey.⁵⁷ The Berndts eagerly accepted the position and were no doubt relieved that their travails in South Australia were at an end. The overall scheme, they were told by Elkin, had been discussed with Chinnery and A. S. Bingle, General Manager of the Australian Investment Agency (commonly referred to as Vesteys): 'each...concerned, from different points of view, with Aboriginal labour problems in that region and with the diminishing Aboriginal population on cattle stations, as well as with the future of the "bush" people and of Aborigines [eventually] released from military employment'.⁵⁸

They were interviewed by Bingle, who decided to give them a six-month trial. Almost from the start, there were problems. Soon after agreeing to employ

53 C. H. Berndt to Houison, 22 June 1944, ANRC Records, NLA, MS 482, 857a.

54 Geoffrey Gray, *Abrogating Responsibility: Vesteys, anthropology and the future of Aboriginal people* (Melbourne, 2011 [forthcoming]).

55 Elkin to Carrodus, 9 August 1944, EP, 41/4/2/213.

56 Australian Investment Agency to Chinnery, 22 May 1944, Chinnery Papers [hereinafter CP]. Now in the NLA (MS 766), but I accessed this material when it was in the care of the family.

57 Elkin to R. M. Berndt and C. H. Berndt, 30 May 1944, EP, 246/613.

58 R. M. Berndt and C. H. Berndt, *End of an Era: Aboriginal labour in the Northern Territory* (Canberra, 1987), p. 29; Gray, *Abrogating Responsibility*.

them, Bingle was informed that Ronald had adverse reports emanating from South Australia and that the WA Government had refused to grant the Berndts a permit to visit Aboriginal reserves and of the unfavourable views of Military Intelligence. Initially Bingle had offered to provide the Berndts with a car and full camping equipment 'so they could wander at their convenience over the whole areas and become acquainted with their problem'.⁵⁹ This was not possible as Military intelligence imposed restrictions on the movement of the Berndts, forbidding movement north of Alice Springs without supervision. The Berndts were disappointed and believed it would seriously hinder their research. Nevertheless, Bingle and the Berndts decided to go ahead with the survey. Bingle's decision was aided in part by the recommendations of Elkin and Chinnery of the Berndts being the 'right type'.

As the survey progressed, relations between the Berndts and Bingle deteriorated. Vestey's was disappointed with what it saw as hostility towards the problems of running a commercial organisation that needed to show a profit; the Berndts accused Vestey's of not being interested in changing the conditions of employment and treatment of Aboriginal station workers.

When Bingle attempted to terminate their services at the end of December 1944, they refused to move from Birrindudu, an outstation of Gordon Downs, where they were at the time. Bingle relented and the survey continued. On the other hand, almost paradoxically, they occasionally threatened to resign, although not directly to Bingle. They wrote to Chinnery: 'after a period of nearly ten months, we see that Mr Bingle's attitude is quite unchanged, that conditions on the stations are unaltered, and that our position is not only negative but, at times, farcical.' Bingle did not 'wish to utilise us in the capacity of anthropologists, or welfare or liaison officers; he is concerned solely with the possibilities of active recruiting'. They considered resignation but decided to 'not resign for the time being, but will await our dismissal—unless of course you and Professor Elkin would like us to take the initiative in this respect'.⁶⁰

The overriding problem and cause for much of their disagreement with Bingle was the way in which they were expected to recruit new labour; it was anathema, as they saw themselves as 'legitimate anthropologists' who would not violate existing [government] regulations...If there were to be any hint of this, then our future work would be jeopardized, a prospect which causes us considerable apprehension'.⁶¹ They were 'unhappy to think that our association with this firm can prejudice our status as anthropologists, and so severely limit the natural course of our work'.⁶² Concern for the treatment, conditions and welfare of

59 Bingle to Abbott, 10 August 1944, CP.

60 R. M. Berndt to Chinnery, 24 June 1945, CP.

61 R. M. Berndt to Chinnery, 21 August 1945, CP.

62 R. M. Berndt to Chinnery, 24 June 1945, CP.

Aboriginal pastoral workers was important but their future as anthropologists was equally as important.⁶³ Vestey's might have been hostile and resistant to change but the Berndts' time had not been wasted. They had collected 'a great amount of material, giving a fairly complete picture of the indigenous cultures of 'Gurindgi, 'Mudbara, 'Njining-'Wundgira, and 'Walbiri-'Woneiga people, including language, phonetic text, long song cycles of mythology, camp census, individual genealogies and case histories, etc.', and they were 'carrying out work in which we are deeply interested'.⁶⁴

They completed their report for Vestey's in June 1946. It was, they claimed with some justification, the first applied anthropological study undertaken in Australia.⁶⁵

In the event of either their dismissal or their resignation, they offered their services to Chinnery. They wanted

to be of greater use to [the Native Affairs] Department and to the natives generally...if there was work available in the department at some time in the future it might be possible for us to carry out anthropological work in co-operation or connection with your Department, so that all the material obtained by us could be presented and utilised for the benefit of the natives.

They could be used to 'study special areas or given situations—e.g. the release of natives from military camps and the question of their ultimate absorption in pastoral or other occupations; or field or patrol work in Arnhem Land'. Most of the information they had collected while working at Vestey's they would make available for use by the Native Affairs Branch—'[f]or instance, data which we have collected in reference to individual natives (their names, case histories, etc.) should by rights be on the files of your Department, to supplement existing information'.⁶⁶ In addition, they had collected 'much information relating to culture contact, in which we were mainly interested' and which would be of use in the administration—that is, the management and control—of Aboriginal people.⁶⁷ Chinnery did not avail himself of their offer.

In September 1946, Elkin arranged funding for them to work at Yirrkala in eastern Arnhem Land, where they spent the next 12 months. They returned to Arnhem Land in 1949 and 1950 and frequently thereafter for the rest of their

63 See Geoffrey Gray, 'Abrogating Responsibility? Applied anthropology, Vestey's, Aboriginal labour, 1944–1946', *Australian Aboriginal Studies*, 2 (2000), pp. 27–39.

64 R. M. Berndt to Chinnery, 24 June 1945, CP.

65 R. M. Berndt, 'Aboriginal Fieldwork in South Australia in the 1940s and its Implications for the Present', *Records of the South Australian Museum*, 23:1 (1989), pp. 59–68.

66 Providing such personal material on Aboriginal people to a government agency seems to have presented no ethical problem for the Berndts at the time.

67 R. M. Berndt to Chinnery, 24 June 1945, CP.

lives. Between 1952 and 1953, they worked in the eastern Highlands of New Guinea, which formed the basis of their PhDs, which they completed in 1955. In all they spent almost 15 years in the field. The results of their research during the war—with few exceptions, particularly *From Black to White* (1951)—remained unpublished and unavailable after the war. A revised and edited version of their 1946 *Vesteys Report* was published as *End of an Era* in 1987, and their Lower River Murray research was published as *A World That Was* in 1993.⁶⁸

There is little doubt that anthropological fieldwork absorbed them: they wanted nothing more than to remain in the field, working as anthropologists and collecting ethnographic information including artefacts.⁶⁹ Ronald had come to anthropology poorly qualified; he had left school at fourteen and, to enrol in the diploma course at the University of Sydney, he had to fudge his schooling and university entry. He needed not only determination but also patronage to achieve his ambition, unlike Catherine, who had followed what we might think of as a normal academic trajectory.

Ronald and Catherine gained considerable advantage over their contemporaries, many of whom had suspended their studies for the duration of the war. Their work for Vesteys did them no harm; it was after all under the auspices of Elkin, who controlled both funding and research in Australia. The grounds for Ronald's military exemption remain unclear but it benefited him directly in that he was able to conduct unimpeded anthropological research during the war. In the end, it was a combination of happenstance, luck, determination, ambition and strategic advice from, and the patronage of, Elkin that enabled the Berndts to work through the war at their chosen vocation. The war undoubtedly enhanced Ronald's career, providing opportunities and preferment that would never otherwise have arisen. At the war's end, they were described as 'these two most experienced and thorough workers'.⁷⁰

Ronald overcame his poor academic record by initially being awarded a Diploma in Anthropology (in May 1943) but more importantly by obtaining a Bachelor of Arts degree by Research in 1951, followed by an MA in 1954, all based on his (and Catherine's) decade in the field, and the publications arising from that research. He attended the London School of Economics (LSE), with Catherine, where they were both awarded their doctorates in June 1956. He returned to a

68 For a list of their publications, see Robert Tonkinson and Michael Howard (eds), *Going It Alone? Prospects for Aboriginal autonomy: essays in honour of Ronald and Catherine Berndt* (Canberra, 1990), pp. 45–63.

69 Geoffrey Gray, "'Cluttering up the department": Ronald Berndt and the distribution of the University of Sydney ethnographic collection', *reCollections: Journal of the National Museum of Australia*, 2:2 (2007), pp. 153–79; Kate Brittlebank, 'Anthropology, Fine Art and Missionaries: The Berndt Kalighat album rediscovered', *Journal of the History of Collections* [e-journal], 2007, pp. 1–16, viewed 24 May 2008, <<http://jhc.oxfordjournals.org/cgi/reprint/fhm017v1?ijkey=es6PvCTMKd7t0sK&keytype=ref>> For the extent of their collection in the Berndt Museum, see <<http://www.berndt.uwa.edu.au/>>

70 Elkin, *Report of Committee on Anthropology*, 7 August 1947, EP, 161/4/1/81.

lectureship at the University of Sydney, but on the appointment of J. A. Barnes as Professor and the realisation that Barnes was not favourably disposed to him, Ronald accepted a position as Senior Lecturer in Anthropology at the University of Western Australia.⁷¹ Between 1956 and his retirement in 1984, Ronald built a large and successful department. In 1963, he was made professor.

⁷¹ Geoffrey Gray and Doug Munro, 'Australian Aboriginal Anthropology at the Crossroads: Finding a successor to A. P. Elkin, 1955', *The Australian Journal of Anthropology*, 22:3 (2011), pp. 351–69.