

Encounters with Indigeneity: Writing about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples

by Jeremy Beckett

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This volume comprises a selection of Jeremy Beckett's previously published articles and chapters in edited books, linked by the theme of Australian Indigenous studies. It encompasses studies both of Australian Aboriginal social life and culture (primarily in New South Wales) and those of Torres Strait Islanders. Beckett's wider corpus reveals an even more diverse set of interests and field areas. The book has a useful (and oddly, anonymous) foreword, and an introduction by Jeremy Beckett himself in which he outlines the circumstances of his research, and his approach to fieldwork and analysis through a career spanning half a century.

Frustrated in his early plans to do fieldwork in New Guinea, Beckett carried out research for his MA (in 1957) in the pastoral west of New South Wales, and subsequently in the Torres Strait Islands (1958–61) for the PhD. These were to become long-term fieldwork locations. He also carried out shorter-term research in the Cook Islands and the Philippines. The resulting publications demonstrate a wide range of interests and approaches: biography, political economy, history and social change, the relation between myth and history, religion, music, Indigenous identity, and Native Title.

A number of themes and perspectives connect the 11 chapters. Beckett's work as a whole is characterised by a political economy approach and, consonant with its Marxian roots, a historical perspective, aimed primarily at the colonial and post-colonial context of Indigenous lives. One of the things that makes the work special, though, is the combination of these theoretical underpinnings with a concern for individuals and their particular lives and circumstances. Each can

serve as a window illuminating the other. Beckett frames the relationship in terms of the 'encounter' with others (p. xiv), and writes of the tension between ethnographic encounter and the necessity for understanding people's lives in the changing wider contexts. Writing of the long engagement with external forces on the part of Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders, he suggests that: 'My task was to identify the forces bearing on them and the social and cultural resources they brought to this engagement: their sense of who they were in the broader scheme of things' (p. xiii). A further element is his comparative perspective, drawing on studies of settler societies elsewhere, especially in the Americas.

Beckett begins in Chapter 1 with his encounter with George Dutton, and sketches the course of Dutton's life against the background of the history of the colonisation and development of the far west of New South Wales. Beckett skilfully combines extracts from Dutton's own accounts of his life and circumstances with historical and social analysis of the wider context: 'He had his own message and his own way of communicating it. In showing us the country, he was telling us who he was, and what his rightful place was in it' (p. 24).

The following chapter, 'Walter Newton's History of the World – or Australia', focuses on the sense Walter Newton made of his changing world. Beckett situates this enterprise within what he sees (following Sider) as a central contradiction in colonialism; colonisers are caught between creating the colonised as 'other', and incorporating the other within a system of domination (p. 28). Rejecting the term 'syncretism', Beckett sees Walter Newton's narrative as negotiating the contradiction between alienation and incorporation in its blend of ancestral and Biblical themes, giving temporal priority to Aboriginal mythology, but in which the ancestral figure Guluwiri is melded with God. Colonisation is depicted as but one episode in a sequence of disasters, and Aboriginal and White people are encompassed within the same moral space. The next chapter discusses the relationship between myth and history, framed around, and critiquing, Lévi-Strauss' distinction between 'hot' and 'cold' societies. This is followed by a discussion of Beckett's transcription and editing of George Lalor's 'oral history' (as Lalor himself called it).

Chapters 5 to 8 are taken up with the Torres Strait Islands. The first of these is a reprint of Beckett's influential article on internal colonialism, which deals with the political economy of the islands as a group, combining historical and ethnographic perspectives. The second focuses on one particular, rather isolated island (which Beckett calls Kawa) in which the only route to status was being a good Christian. The third of the set broadens out again to consider three kinds of Christianity in the Torres Strait Islands which, Beckett argues, must be understood in the context of colonisation. Chapter 8 turns to the politics of

representation in the Torres Strait Islands, in the context of historical changes from colonisation, through the period of 'welfare colonialism' to Fourth World politics, and of changing Federal and State relations. The chapter traces the increasing skills of Islanders in the national political arena.

This leads in Chapter 9 to the Murray Islands land case that preceded the Native Title decision of the High Court in the *Mabo* case. The chapter details the history of the earlier case, picking out for particular discussion the question of authenticity, which hinged on the difficulty of demonstrating continuity in relations to land in light of the changes brought about by colonisation. Beckett links this difficulty to problems anthropology has with the analysis of continuity and change. Evolutionary anthropologists, functionalists and those coming from a political economy perspective have all tended to represent cultures depicted as 'primitive' as irreparably transformed by 'civilisation', or as having survived and incorporating alien influences, 'yet remaining essentially themselves' (p. 201).

The final chapters are on Indigenous identity, and again reflect Beckett's historical perspective. Chapter 10, on changing relations of Aboriginal people with the state, concludes that Australia has 'transformed its Indigenous population from virtually passive colonial subjects, situated inside the state but outside the nation, to a political constituency consisting of citizens who are simultaneously a minority' (p. 226). The state institutionalised marginalisation 'through the rehabilitation of Aboriginality as both a way of life and an honourable status within the nation'. Political disenfranchisement required the setting up of consultative structures, while the rehabilitation of Aboriginal identity required 'at least a gesture towards self-determination' (p. 227). The last chapter sets issues of indigeneity in Australia within a broad international context, including Mexico, Amazonia, and North America, again with some emphasis on problems of indigenous people having to appear 'authentic'.

A striking feature of the volume is that it represents a remarkably cohesive corpus of work, united by themes and perspectives to which Beckett has consistently returned, through the development of appropriate analytical tools, such as the application of the theory of internal colonialism to the Torres Strait Islands, and the concept of welfare colonialism. The corpus demonstrates the melding of the fruits of personal 'encounters' and indeed long-term social relationships, with a keen structural and historical analytical sense. The book repays reading for its insights into Aboriginal and Islander lives and their social, historical and economic contexts.

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