

From Depression to War

Abstract for chapter 1

By 1930, in Australia, as in most other countries, the economy was in the grip of the Depression. The decade between the onset of the Depression and the beginning of the Second World War deepened the poverty of a minority group that was already, in 1929, at the bottom of the Australian economic ladder.

During the period 1929 to 1945, certain conferences and pieces of federal and state legislation reflected turning points in the black/white race relations of the Depression and war years. Some literary works are also representative of the same phenomenon. However these turning points resulted from the efforts of a small, enlightened, and progressive elite of individuals and were well received during the period only by like-minded Australians.

The role of the Second World War as a catalyst for policy change is shown as being undeniably central.

Keywords

Aborigines, Aborigines' Progressive Association (APA), anthropology, Association for the Protection of Native Races (APNR), black/white race relations, the Depression

1

From Depression to War

In 1929, the impact of the American stock market crash was felt all around the world. By 1930, in Australia, as in most other countries, the economy was in the grip of the Depression. Not until the outbreak of World War II did Australia's economy truly recover; as the military battles were fought, the economic battle was won.

But there was much more to the Depression than its impact upon Australia's national economic performance. In retrospect, it is far too easy to gloss over the personal suffering of the period, the thwarted aspirations, the dislocation of families. It is even easier for a student of the era to gloss over the severe plight of Aboriginal Australians during the period. The decade between the onset of the Depression and the beginning of World War II deepened the poverty of a minority group which was already, in 1929, at the bottom of the Australian economic ladder. To cite one example, Aboriginal reserve dwellers in New South Wales received only 41 pence per week throughout the entire Depression, while between 1930 and 1936 dole payments rose from 69 to 108 pence per week.¹

In fact as Rowley notes, in order to avoid spending dole money on Aborigines during these years, the police coerced significant numbers into returning to live on government reserves.² Aboriginal people throughout Australia were invariably hit harder by the Depression, and took longer to recover from its hardships, than the white citizens of Australia.³ This was just one factor which oppressed Aboriginal people to an inordinate degree during the Depression years. Not only economically, but politically, judicially, socially and culturally, Black Australians suffered at the hands of white politicians, policy-makers, and pastoralists. In Rowley's words, 'One of the effects of the great depression, all over Australia, seems to have been a more rigid

containment in institutions, where conditions were probably worse than ever before, with enduring effects on Aboriginal attitudes'.⁴

The late 1930s and early 1940s was also an era of ironies. One of the greatest of these was that the 1939-1945 period, which saw the height of legislative restrictiveness, also saw the first tentative moves towards legal equality for Aboriginal Australians. Another was that the framers of Aboriginal policy in the states and territories of Australia devised measures for the 'protection' of a race from extinction, just when it was on the brink, in relative terms, of a population explosion. Therefore, the policy-makers had to execute a significant about-face mid way through the era. A third irony was the fact that, while atrocities and massacres of Aboriginal people were still a very recent memory in the early 1930s – especially in the Northern Territory – a greater number of influential philanthropic groups dedicated to the advancement of Black Australians were formed between 1929 and 1939 than ever before. Throughout, it was frequently international pressures and events which acted as a catalyst for the improvement of the lot of Aborigines, rather than domestic policies. This chapter provides an historical overview of this complex period and its effects upon Aboriginal Australians, from the commencement of the Depression to the close of World War II.

It is clear that White Australians held numerous and often conflicting views of Aborigines, ranging from the sympathetic and humanitarian to the violently racist and bigoted. But, as the 1930s began, almost everyone agreed on one point: the Aboriginal people were a race doomed to extinction. Of course, the emphasis at this stage was upon the numerical waning of the full-blooded Aboriginal population, and in this regard, the demographic evidence appeared to be incontrovertible. From a population estimated to be in the vicinity of 300 000 in 1788, only about 60 000 remained in 1930, and this was a generous estimate, according to those such as Stanner.⁵ More specifically, approximately 8 000 Aborigines remained in New South Wales in 1930 and 1 000 in Victoria: 'only about a tenth of the population of these areas in 1788'.⁶ To most of the population, which was either professionally or personally concerned with Aboriginal Australians, the fading away of the full-bloods seemed inevitable. It appeared that Aborigines in all of Australia would go the way of the Tasmanian blacks who were commonly believed to have been totally exterminated in the space of some seventy years.

Concern for the plight of the full-bloods was motivated by a number of factors. These included the keenness of anthropologists to

preserve for posterity that which might otherwise be lost forever, the desire of the state and Commonwealth governments to avoid the international criticism which would follow the extinction of a unique indigenous people, and the sincere concern of some private citizens for a seemingly doomed ethnic minority. In almost all cases, this anxiety was couched in terms reminiscent of a contemporary campaign to save an endangered animal species. The analogy is an instructive one, for in 1930 the reigning popular view of Aborigines was that they were somehow sub-human, both intellectually and culturally inferior to whites.⁷ It is ironic that this same view acted both as a spark for a campaign of protection and as a rationale for many of the massacres and 'punitive expeditions' which persisted into the early 1930s.

These allegedly 'retaliatory' massacres in themselves focused public attention upon the precariousness of Aboriginal existence as much as they did upon the gross injustice of the frontier vigilante squads involved. Historians have documented at some length such punitive raids of the late 1920s as the Umbali Massacre⁸ and the murder of thirty-one Aborigines to avenge the killing of a white dingo-hunter in the vicinity of Alice Springs in 1928.⁹ But it is necessary to discuss here the Tuckiar case of 1932-1934, for it threw into relief many of the issues directly involved in the formulation of Aboriginal policy in the 1930s.

The exceptional case of the Arnhem Land Aborigine, Tuckiar, accused of the murder of Constable McColl, is fully documented by Rowley in *The Destruction of Aboriginal Society*.¹⁰ As he notes, the court-room drama involved the church, the state, the judiciary, various pressure groups and even foreign governments. Missionaries, who were often a frustrated minority in Aboriginal policy-making in the 1930s, were involved in the somewhat dubious apprehension of the accused. During the trial, the impartiality of the judiciary was called into question, in particular, the conduct of Judge Wells. Political officials ranging as high as the Prime Minister were directly involved in the aftermath of Tuckiar's conviction, opposed so vehemently by pressure groups such as the Association for the Protection of Native Races, led by Professor Elkin. Even the British government was affected by the publicity surrounding the case. Broome puts it most succinctly:

Within two days the Prime Minister, J.A. Lyons, was on the telephone to Elkin, to inquire about the truth of his allegations, as Lyons had just been approached by the

British Dominions office which had read a report of the Tuckiar protest meeting in the *Times*. Pressure was being exerted in high places.¹¹

As Broome goes on to note, Australia was particularly sensitive to international opinion regarding its treatment of native peoples at the time, for its competence to administer a League of Nations mandate over New Guinea (and Nauru) was at stake.¹²

The Tuckiar case was arguably the most visible, the most publicised and the most important of many incidents which worked to the detriment of Aboriginal Australians in the 1930s, particularly in the Northern Territory and Western Australia. It is significant that it occurred in the early 1930s, when concern over the annihilation of full-blooded Aborigines was becoming more pronounced, and that it was foreign intervention which played a noteworthy role in resolving the legal and public debate and prodded the Commonwealth and Australian state governments to revise their Aboriginal policies.

Those policies had to embrace Black Australians with varying degrees of Aboriginal blood, not only the full-bloods ostensibly on the verge of extinction. The demographic situation with regard to mixed-blooded Aborigines was very different: in relative terms, throughout the 1920s and 1930s, part-Aborigines were undergoing a population explosion. For example, in 1938 Stanner quoted current figures concerning the rate of population increase of mixed-blooded Aborigines in the Northern Territory. The estimate of 18 live births/1000 for the part-Aboriginal group absolutely dwarfed the growth rate of the white population of the Territory, calculated at 0.3 live births/1000.¹³ No demographic training is required to reach the conclusion that miscegenation between blacks and whites was widespread, the typical sexual union being between European men and Aboriginal women. Furthermore, the men involved – most often in the frontier areas of Queensland, Western Australia and the Northern Territory – were hardly motivated by any compassionate desire to aid the ‘preservation’ of the Aboriginal race, and they very seldom accepted and recognised their offspring.

The exponential increase in the part-Aboriginal population created very serious problems for the racist and the humanitarian alike. The former was increasingly cursed with visible examples of his compatriots’ predilection for so-called ‘Black Velvet’, and the suspicion that the Aboriginal race might not be as moribund as was officially supposed. The latter viewed with concern the exploitation of black women and the dilemma of the ‘half-caste’: neither fully a traditional

Aborigine nor entirely white. Therefore, in the early 1930s, both racists and humanitarians officially requested governmental policies which would segregate blacks and whites; policies which would protect the purity of both races. As one Queensland politician put it:

We must be careful to see that the half caste is not given the same liberties that are enjoyed by the whiteman. We do not want any further mixing of the population. We want to keep the white race white.¹⁴

The operative word is, of course, 'officially'. One of the ironies of the 1930s was the gulf between the articulated aims of the policymakers and the conditions in which those for whom the policy was devised actually lived.¹⁵ The hope that legislative pronouncements could make Aboriginal women safe from predatory white males was as ill-founded as the belief that the police could be impartial and effective Protectors of Aborigines. The fact that the officially enunciated theory of Aboriginal policy shifted so dramatically in the second half of the 1930s – almost entirely because of a national conference of 'experts' in Aboriginal administration – is a further indication of how arbitrary and unresponsive to local events the policy-makers actually were.¹⁶

In the early years of the 1930s, the two emphases of Aboriginal policy in the states and territories were the protection and the control of Black Australians. J.W. Bleakley's 1929 report on the Northern Territory situation advocated many of the policies introduced in Queensland¹⁷ which were to be adopted in other states throughout the 1930s. Two of the most important of these were the strict control of Aboriginal women (allegedly to prevent miscegenation) and, progressively, the forced removal of mixed-blooded children from their parents and camp life to be raised in orphanages, institutions and foster homes in White Australia. In order to check the rise of the part-Aboriginal population, Black Australians were coerced into and concentrated in reserves during this decade. Various amendments to Aboriginal Acts in the Northern Territory (1933 and 1936), Western Australia (1936), Queensland (1934 and 1939) and South Australia (1939) served to heighten the legislative control of the respective administrations.¹⁸

The new publicity which was showered upon the frontier massacres and atrocities which had taken place highlighted the need for safeguards for Aboriginal human rights. Indeed, many philanthropic groups did press for the inviolability of native reserves. But the end result of the legislation which ensued restricted those human rights to a greater extent than ever before. In Rowley's words:

The general trend of the 1930s was to establish Aboriginal administrations on the basis of even more rigid control, for their 'good' and for their education . . . The spectacular injustices of the frontier had produced a real reaction, but the effort was to be channelled into more extensive and more rigid control of individuals.¹⁹

One of the major shifts during the 1930s was the fact that, while much attention was initially devoted to the dying-out of full-blooded Aborigines and the concomitant necessity for 'protection', as the decade wore on, it was the part-Aboriginal problem which began to take precedence in the minds of administrators. The Aboriginal policy of this period had to deal with the apparent extinction of one group and, concurrently, the proliferation of another, closely related group. This presented a serious logical problem: while it was decided that the former group would survive best totally separated from white society, the latter allegedly required total and continuous contact with that society; in a word, assimilation. The uncomfortable mixture of the two concepts was most clearly reflected on a national scale at the Commonwealth and State Authorities Conference in Canberra, in April 1937, which passed the following resolution:

This Conference believes that the destiny of the natives of aboriginal origin, but not of the full blood, lies in their ultimate absorption by the people of the Commonwealth, and it therefore recommends that all efforts be directed to that end.²⁰

This conference was significant perhaps more for the matters it did not address than for those which it did confront.²¹ Its importance derives from the following factors: first, it enunciated a principle of Aboriginal administration – that of assimilation – which was not to be consistently applied until a decade later. Second, key words in the statement, such as 'destiny' and 'absorption', indicate the extent to which coercion was embraced as an administrative concept at the time. Third, it has tended to deflect the attention of many students of Aboriginal history away from other issues which bore more directly upon Aboriginal Australians in 1937. In other words, the Aboriginal policy of the 1930s was certainly significant, but it was not a sufficient factor to entirely explain the behaviour of Black Australians during the period. As a consequence, the historiography of the era generally suffers from an unwarranted emphasis upon matters of policy formulation.²²

One of the most important questions for students of the era to ask themselves is, 'How did Aboriginal people react to the legislative circumscription of their lives?' Here, Aboriginal oral history can provide valuable insights. For example, researching the oral history of the

Wiradjuri people of New South Wales, Read has found that during the Depression they responded similarly to a variety of factors. The Wiradjuri:

moved less frequently than previously from reserve to reserve or from town to town. Through choice, economic circumstance or legislative action, most people remained on the official or unofficial camps.²³

Only in the past decade have Australian researchers begun to try to consider Aboriginal history from the black viewpoint. Rather than emphasising what has been done to Black Australians, recent studies have also highlighted Aboriginal reaction and response. For example, Broome details the Aboriginal resistance movements of the 1920s and 1930s, illustrating the fact that black political protest is not a phenomenon which commenced in the 1960s. He describes the genesis of such groups as the Australian Aborigines Progressive Association (1924 to 1927), the Euralian Association of Western Australia (formed in 1934), and the Aboriginal petition to the King of 1937 (which never reached its destination) on behalf of the Australian Aborigines League.²⁴ The most important Aboriginal protest group of the era was William Ferguson's Aborigines' Progressive Association (APA), formed in 1934. Although its activities and the life of Ferguson himself are both thoroughly described in Horner's *Vote Ferguson For Aboriginal Freedom*,²⁵ the APA must be at least briefly examined with reference to the contradictions of the 1929-1945 period.

The first of these stemmed from the fact that the APA, and its leading lights Ferguson and John Patten, strongly emphasised the view that Aboriginal people were the equals of the white citizens of Australia. Their conclusion – which would certainly not be embraced by contemporary Aboriginal activists – was that blacks deserved both citizenship and equality via complete absorption into White Australian society. Despite the rhetoric of the 1937 conference, the time was not yet ripe to even attempt the assimilation of Aborigines into the larger Australian community.²⁶ In the light of later government policy, it is ironic that the views which Ferguson propounded fell upon deaf ears, and he died before any widespread and sincere efforts to promote assimilation had been undertaken in the nation. Just as ironic was the fact that the Commonwealth government saw the need to obtain an Aboriginal blessing of its Sesquicentenary celebrations in Sydney on 26 August 1938, and engaged the services of some tractable blacks from western New South Wales for this purpose. However, it virtually

ignored the APA's 'Day of Mourning' meeting – held only a short distance away and timed to coincide with the fanfare – which lamented the same event on behalf of the Aboriginal people.

Nevertheless, the symbolic and the actual achievement of the APA should not be belittled. For example, its 1938 manifesto, 'Aborigines Claim Citizenship Rights', stated in no uncertain terms that 'this festival of 150 years' so called 'progress' in Australia commemorates also 150 years of misery and degradation imposed upon the original native inhabitants by the white invaders of this country'.²⁷ This was one of the first times that Black Australians had publicly submitted their view of the continent's interracial history.²⁸ Furthermore, Ferguson and Patten made a significant breakthrough when, shortly afterwards, they secured an interview with Prime Minister Lyons even if the Commonwealth's Aboriginal policy was not dramatically affected by the visit. Finally, such events as the walk-off of the residents of the Cumeragunga Reserve in February 1939, the investigation into the affairs of the Aborigines' Protection Board by the Public Service Board, the New South Wales Aborigines' Welfare Act of 1940, and the eventual appointment of two blacks to the state's Aboriginal Welfare Board (in 1943) are all attributable – at least in part – to the concerted lobbying and protest of Ferguson, Patten and the APA. The call for Aboriginal rights may have altered both in content and in tone over the years but it has not ceased.²⁹

Aboriginal protest organisations of the 1930s were, however, neither the most articulate nor the most influential of the pressure groups arguing the Black Australian cause. There were a number of active religious and philanthropic organisations – such as the National Missionary Council – but one of the most effective and successful of these was the Association for the Protection of Native Races (APNR), which has already been noted in connection with the Tuckiar case. Professor A.P. Elkin's 1931 address to the APNR, published in 1933 under the title *A Policy For The Aborigines*, is considered to express 'the first notion of a "positive" policy' in Aboriginal affairs, 'unadventurous as it may seem now'.³⁰ This concept affirmed, in Stanner's words, 'that a major development of Aboriginal economic, social and political life from its broken down state was a thinkable possibility'.³¹ If publication of this pamphlet did represent 'a turning point of Aboriginal affairs in Australia'³² and it therefore is an important document in the nation's cultural history, it is noteworthy that it was written by an anthropologist.

The predominant role of anthropologists from 1929 to 1945 (and indeed, to the present) in interpreting Aboriginal society, analysing its ills, and in recommending ameliorative policies, is remarkable. In fact, the Canadian historian K.A. MacKirdy commented in 1966 that '[Australian] historians generally have been content to leave the study of Aborigines to the anthropologists and then to ignore the anthropologists'!³³ Though MacKirdy's observation is an exaggeration, the question remains: 'Just how influential were the anthropologists?'

The contribution of anthropologists was major, especially in the realm of academic and policy considerations. For example, the year 1930 saw the publication of the inaugural issue of the anthropological journal *Oceania* and thus, 'for the first time Australia maintained an academic journal devoted to the record of native people'.³⁴ In addition, the editorial of this first issue succinctly outlined the pragmatic potential of scientific and anthropological research:

The general policy of *Oceania* will also be guided by the view that anthropology is no longer to be treated as an academic subject having a purely theoretical interest, but can and should be made a science of immediate practical value, more particularly in relation to the government and education of native peoples.³⁵

This decision to embark upon what may be dubbed 'applied' rather than 'pure' anthropology was itself a conscious theoretical choice. In addition, as Mulvaney illustrates, other scientists were altering their methodological perspective in 1930. In that year Hale and Tindale's excavation report on the Devon Downs shelter also appeared in print. This was 'the first systematic attempt, in Australia, to apply stratigraphic, rather than conjectural principles, to the uncovering of aboriginal prehistory'. Mulvaney summarises: '[1930 was therefore the year] in which objective studies of the aboriginal past and present reached maturity within Australia'.³⁶

In themselves, these were primarily theoretical breakthroughs. Like much of the high-flown Aboriginal policy of the 1929-1945 period, such considerations were somewhat removed from the life-and-death issues of poverty, disease, malnutrition and repression which afflicted Aboriginal Australians daily during this era. Nevertheless, it is true that the 1930s did see a number of distinct attitudinal changes in White Australia: in scientific methodology, in protectionist policies, in philanthropic involvement, in press coverage of atrocities, and in government lobbying. Many of these can be traced to the direct influence of anthropologists. But it is open to question to what extent

these shifts actually affected the survival conditions of Black Australians at the time.

For example, one officially sanctioned attempt to address the problem of Aboriginal living conditions of the day in the Northern Territory was the policy of assimilation, first enunciated in 1937. However, in 1938 Stanner, always a shrewd and observant commentator, indicated the policy's limitations when he posed the following rhetorical question:

Can the pioneer fringes of Australia blot out such bitter complications . . . suspend all the convictions and attitudes which would be an embarrassment to the new 'policy', and on any given morning in 1938 set out, say, to 'absorb' their mixed-blood populations?³⁷

So, despite the tendency to laud the achievements and influence of the scientific/anthropological group during this period, the lobbying power of these professionals was still circumscribed by other community and institutional factors. Biskup notes that in spite of the exhortations in *Oceania*, 'Most Aboriginal administrators . . . continued to stress the "practical" nature of their work, deprecating unsolicited advice from the scientists', and he carries on:

As late as 1945 . . . when urged to appoint an anthropologist to his staff, Neville's successor, F.I. Bray, replied, '. . . the welfare of the native is not bound up with the advice and guidance of trained anthropologists, and it is not apparent just what advantage would result to the natives.'³⁸

If some Aboriginal affairs administrators viewed the work of anthropologists with scepticism during the 1929-1945 era, they were far more frequently critical of missionaries in this period. For example, in Western Australia it was pastoral employers who consistently had the ear and the sympathy of the state's Aboriginal affairs officials.³⁹ The missionary lobby in the same state was repeatedly ignored and criticised by such influential policy-makers as A.O. Neville, the Chief Protector of Aborigines from 1914 to 1940 and Commissioner of Native Affairs for the last four of those years. Eloquent proof of this pro-pastoralist bias was the fact that, relatively speaking, missions were almost entirely passed over in the Western Australian Department of Native Affairs' budgets of the day. For example, in 1939-1940, they received a mere \$3776 out of a total departmental allocation of \$135550.⁴⁰ The financial neglect of the missionary group was not confined to Neville's state, for the Northern Territory presented a very similar case. More than twenty missions had been founded there by

the 1920s, yet the work of the Church Missionary Society in Arnhem Land during this time was voted only 250 pounds per year by the Territory administration.⁴¹ It was not until 1953 that the financial straits of Australian missions were eased in a major way, when the Commonwealth government voted to underwrite and staff the medical and educational services which they provided.⁴²

Why were missions so under-financed, and why was there animosity between many administrators, protectors, and pastoralists on the one hand and missionaries on the other? Some government officials involved in Aboriginal affairs at the time were, no doubt, opposed to the 'Christianising' which was the policy on many missions. According to Biskup, there were too many reports of irregularities on the missions – including accusations of sexual relations between men of the cloth and their spiritual charges – for them to be ignored.⁴³ As well, there was evidence of violent corporal punishment on some missions, including chainings and floggings in extreme cases.⁴⁴ But perhaps the most important factor was that mission Aborigines were, frequently, Aborigines lost to the droving and farming industries. Therefore, it is no surprise that a coalition between pastoralists and governments often arose (in the Territory, Western Australia, and Queensland), whereby the former agreed to provide for poor blacks on their properties while the latter pegged wages at artificially low levels, and instructed Protectors to discourage Aborigines from leaving their pastoral employers.⁴⁵

In fairness, it must be said that there were also many enlightened and sympathetic missionaries. In addition, there were missionaries and other clergymen, such as A.P. Elkin, who definitely did exert a significant influence upon the formulation of Aboriginal policy in various areas of Australia. They affected domestic policy and practice indirectly – through overseas philanthropic organisations, funding bodies, churches and even newspaper reports – at least as much as they did directly. Missionaries could be instrumental mediators of foreign views of Australia's native affairs policies. By the same token, what gave the missionaries this prominent role in the first place was, to some extent, the existing international interest in the plight of Black Australians.

Although it is difficult to quantify the precise degree of foreign influence upon the Commonwealth and state Aboriginal policies beyond the assertion that it was considerable, it is far easier to highlight common characteristics of those policies. One of the most striking of these was the tendency of Aboriginal affairs administrators to become

enamoured of the status quo. During the 1929-1945 period, they often succumbed to an inertia which inhibited enlightened thought and action. The logical corollary of this inertia was that radical new approaches to Aboriginal affairs during this era were confined to an elite of theorists and practitioners. As Stanner honestly and somewhat ruefully admitted in 1968:

It seems clear to me now that the change of attitude and policy towards the Aborigines which we trace back to the 1930s was confined very largely to a rather small group of people who had special associations with their care, administration or study. Outside that group the changes made very little impact for a long time.⁴⁶

Yet, it is equally true that there were significant changes – if not always improvements – in the lot of Black Australians during the period. For example, Aboriginal people in New South Wales who in 1929 were still being systematically dispersed were methodically concentrated in reserves in the 1930s, only to be dispersed once again in the early 1940s.⁴⁷ The judiciary was beginning to take account of customary law in court proceedings and the Commonwealth government did overturn guilty verdicts which had been handed down to Aborigines accused of murder. Many factors – anthropological influence, the protests of philanthropic groups, media coverage of atrocities, and others – played a part, but a common thread running through the events of the era is that the primary motor for change came from forces which were largely external to Australia in origin. These included the Depression, the sanction of world opinion in general terms and that of the British Foreign Office in specific terms, legal cases in other British colonies and former colonies, and the outbreak of World War II. Probably the most influential of these forces were the Depression and the Second World War. The detrimental effects of the former upon Aboriginal people have already been noted, but the varied effects of the latter upon Black Australians deserve further attention.

The accepted historical wisdom in Australia is that for the first time in its history, during World War II the country was under threat of direct foreign invasion by an aggressive, imperialistic power. No Aboriginal Australian has yet written a 'black history' of World War II but, when one does appear, it may revise this orthodox view quite dramatically. For example, it may well be based on the premise that, just over one hundred and fifty years after Australia was first invaded by an aggressive, imperialistic power – it was threatened for a second time by a belligerent imperialism. An Aboriginal history of the conflict

would be most welcome because both the military and non-military contributions of Black Australians to the war effort deserve to be more fully investigated. Furthermore, like the first successful invasion of the continent, the second unsuccessful offensive significantly altered Aboriginal roles, perceptions, and (to some extent) powers in Australia.

Historians concur that World War II was one of the most important catalysts for change in Aboriginal affairs in the twentieth century. This consensus cuts across national and ideological boundaries. For example, the Australian social scientist C.D. Rowley, writing in the liberal democratic tradition, states that 'The war may be taken as indicating the end of the process of destruction of Aboriginal society',⁴⁸ and that after World War II 'passive acceptance of the status quo, based on ignorance, could not continue'.⁴⁹ Hannah Middleton, a British Marxist historian agrees that:

Fundamental changes in the conditions of the Aborigines and the development of their own organisations were brought about . . . by the effects of the Second World War within Australia and internationally.⁵⁰

In his excellent unpublished thesis, 'The Army and the Aborigines, World War II', the Australian historian Bob Hall puts the matter very succinctly: 'The Second World War is the most significant and influential event in recent Aboriginal history'.⁵¹

As Hall clearly demonstrates, what is still lacking in Australian historiography is a comprehensive assessment of not only what was done to Aborigines during the 1939-1945 period but also of what they themselves achieved. Second, as Middleton relates, the changes in Aboriginal/white relationships which occurred cannot be explained solely by examining the domestic situation. Both during and after the war – and largely because of it – international factors impinged upon Aboriginal policy, protest, and political activity at least as much as they had during the 1930s. Third, a whole range of specific conditions were either initiated or changed by the war experience: among them, missionary activity, and Aboriginal wages, strike action, health, and demographic patterns. Some of these bore fruit in increased Aboriginal self-confidence and defiance; others resulted in excessive exploitation of Aborigines and consequent Black Australian despair.

In Australia, World War II was a crisis, definitely an aberrant state of affairs and, ultimately, a victory. But was it a victory for all Australians? In all the states of Australia, Aborigines were involved in the war effort

and 'over 1000 people of Aboriginal descent fought with the second AIF'.⁵² During the war years, Aboriginal combatants fought in North Africa and New Guinea. One soldier, Reg Saunders, was the first Black Australian to become a commissioned officer. In addition, an equal number of Aborigines – primarily in Northern Australia – were directly involved in the war effort as coastal patrol and reconnaissance personnel, as support staff, and as labourers in war-related construction and development projects.

Many commentators have implied that the ideal of egalitarianism, which is imputed to the military, extended to all Black Australians involved in the war effort. For example, Broome has observed that 'Their [the Aborigines'] work was praised by the army and they reportedly mixed well with the regular troops'.⁵³ However, as Hall's research has conclusively demonstrated, egalitarianism embraced only some Aborigines in some areas for a specified period of time.⁵⁴ It is noteworthy that throughout the war years it was only Black Australian *men* who were pressed into military and support service, and this was particularly true in 1942, when the nation was threatened with Japanese invasion. Had there been no direct menace to the Australian mainland, there is no doubt that only a small fraction of those Black Australians who saw military action or were employed by the Army would ever have been allowed to contribute. In short, the Army's resort to Aboriginal manpower was largely the result of a crisis mentality operating within the context of strategic considerations.

The supreme irony is that throughout the entire war, official policy forbade the conscription of Aboriginal Australians, yet their familiarity with the land and their talents of tracking and bushcraft were skills highly prized by the military. Indeed, though it was not officially admitted at the time, the anthropologist Donald Thomson was empowered to mobilise an entire unit of about fifty Aborigines skilled in guerilla tactics, in order to repel a potential Japanese invasion in remote areas of Arnhem Land. In Hall's words:

This unusual unit was manned almost entirely by full-blood Aborigines at a time when official Army policy was that only people of substantially European origin or descent could be accepted into the Army.⁵⁵

He continues:

Aborigines could be recruited contrary to official policy so long as they remained out of the public eye and so long as they contributed to the defence of a strategically important area where white manpower was scarce.⁵⁶

The only pay which members of this Northern Territory Special Reconnaissance Unit received was three sticks of tobacco per week.⁵⁷

Similarly contravening published regulations, a separate battalion of approximately 740 Torres Strait Islanders was established, which counted some fifty mainland Aborigines among its numbers. These soldiers gave devoted service until the long enforced separation from their wives and children and the realisation that their wages – which included compulsory payments to the Queensland Government's Protector of Islanders – were only a fraction of those being paid to white soldiers in the islands, caused such unrest that a short-lived strike ensued in January 1944. It was calculated in that year that the Australian government had underpaid its Torres Strait Battalion by a total of some 30 million dollars.⁵⁸ Nearly forty years were to pass before the Commonwealth government partially compensated the Islanders for this deficit.⁵⁹ There is no need to go into all of the details of the events recounted by Hall, but the above situations illustrate the major point that the military was just as willing and able as any other element of Australian society to exploit Black Australians – and did so during the war years.

The highly touted atmosphere of brotherhood between black and white no doubt did exist. Reg Saunders's brother Harry also enlisted, and his section commander said:

We lived with Harry . . . as a brother . . . Our love for him was such that there could be no place for any colour barrier . . . we were *forced together* by events and our comradeship was completely *necessary*.⁶⁰

Yet, even in this testament to racial harmony there is a (perhaps unwitting) undertone implying that Harry's white 'brothers' had pragmatically bowed to the force of circumstances. Like the Anzac Legend, the myth of interracial brotherhood was one born of shared experience in the line of fire, between those of roughly similar rank. However, one cannot presume that because a Saunders or a Silas Roberts won the respect and acceptance of his fellow soldiers that an Aboriginal road worker, or a Black Australian toiling in the machine works at Mataranka in 1943, was accepted as a mate by his commanding officer. However inspiring egalitarianism may have been, it was the exception, not the rule. The only certainty was that it never embraced Aboriginal women, who were doubly disqualified by their sex and their skin from equality with White Australia.

How did Aboriginal people involved in the war effort view these changes? How did World War II affect their perspective? One can

only theorise, but a number of conclusions seem probable. First, those Aborigines involved no doubt welcomed the higher, stable wages offered by the Armed Forces as well as the provision made for maintenance of their dependants. Thus, they were loath to return to the situation of wage exploitation which had existed in the Northern Territory cattle industry. Second, the taste of near-equality which the Armed Forces provided for some Aboriginal soldiers would not be soon forgotten. Instead, it would serve to heighten the bitterness and anger which would attend a return to the prejudice and inequality of civilian life. Men who had fought for their country would deeply resent the legal restrictions which that country placed upon them. Third, it is very probable that – for at least some Black Australians – a more positive and confident self-perception was a result of their war experience.⁶¹ On the other hand, even those Aborigines who did secure vastly improved living conditions in military camps, including full rations for their dependants, did so at the risk of White Australian (and later White and Black American) sexual depredations upon their women, and with the certainty of vulnerability to exploitation by and for liquor. It is true that Aborigines living on Army settlements did receive excellent, free health care but even in this case there is an element of truth in Middleton's observation that:

During the war . . . it was necessary for black and white to work literally side by side. In this context so long as the Aborigines were diseased, suffered from malnutrition and lived in unhygienic conditions they were a direct threat to the health of the Allied troops in the north . . . For the first time since colonisation began the Aborigines received decent food and the same medical care as the whites. But it was not given to them as their right or even as a generous humanitarian gesture but in order to protect the white troops and to maintain their fighting efficiency.⁶²

In spite of their valuable contribution to the war effort, the official prejudice against Aborigines was such that many were forcibly removed from coastal areas in both the Northern Territory and Western Australia and were re-located in native settlements, allegedly for their own protection but, in large measure, because they were perceived as a security risk. For example, 'In June 1942 a Special Mobile Force stationed at Moora rounded up all unemployed Aborigines from the Midlands and interned them in Moore River as "possible potential enemies"'.⁶³ This so-called 'nigger hunting', with its coercive treatment of Aborigines as enemy aliens – almost as prisoners of war – offers a sobering contrast to the mythology of wartime egalitarianism.

On balance it is clear that some, but certainly not all, Aborigines

did benefit directly from their wartime experience. For example, there is little doubt that Aboriginal contact with Black American soldiers represented a real awakening in ideological terms; in Len Watson's words:

The Black Americans had a big effect in the coastal areas in Queensland where there were large numbers of them stationed. We met and talked to them. This laid a basis for learning . . . All this led to a new attitude in blacks: black Australians started to see white Australians as only human beings, not as people with supernatural gifts, or as people to stand in awe of, the men born to be bosses . . . this change in outlook is terribly important – revolutionary in a way. It has laid the basis for all the other changes that have occurred in the post war years.⁶⁴

It is also clear that the taste of wage justice which Aboriginal Australians obtained in certain places and at certain times was of importance, especially in view of post-war Aboriginal agitation in the pastoral industry. But European Australians still had a long way to go if they were to accept Aborigines in general terms for more than pragmatic, exploitative reasons. At the same time, Black Australians had cause to be deeply disillusioned in the face of the evaporation of wartime promises of equality and fulfillment. For example, Hall notes the heartfelt disappointment of Torres Strait Island soldiers who did not receive improved accommodation after the victory over Japan, despite having been repeatedly promised new housing throughout the war years.⁶⁵ In many ways coercion was still to be the norm in Aboriginal affairs, at least until the 1960s.

It is possible only to guess at the nature of the Black Australian perception of Europeans in 1945. However, it is likely that the events of the war did not dramatically improve the views which most Aboriginal people held of White Australians. After all, for every fortunate Aboriginal soldier there was also a black person in a fringe camp, in jail, unemployed, and in an inner-city slum, in all the states of Australia. In short, while it is tempting to laud wartime achievements in the field of Australian black/white race relations one should not be overly enthusiastic. After all, the war experience was an aberrant state of affairs; solutions to the dilemmas faced by Aboriginal Australians had to come in peace-time if they were to be of permanent value. Similarly, it is probable that in the period before, during, and after the conflict, the majority of Australians were at most ambivalent about the Aboriginal cause.

However, the role of World War II as a catalyst for policy change is undeniable. For example, in the field of legislation, Aboriginal soldiers were given a voluntary wartime vote under the *Federal Electoral Act* of

1940 though again, by definition, black women were excluded from this privilege.⁶⁶ Further legislation of the early 1940s provided social services (such as child endowments, old age pensions, and invalid benefits) to certain categories of Aboriginal people.⁶⁷ During the war, various 'Exemption Acts' passed in the states enabled some Black Australians to obtain certificates which substantially entitled them to citizenship rights, if they were prepared to, effectively, renounce their Aboriginality. Despite the distasteful circumstances of the offer, these were rights which McEwen had in 1939 not envisaged Aborigines possessing for generations to come.⁶⁸ Therefore, the 1929-1945 era saw both the summit of legal control and legislative repression of Aboriginal Australians and the first halting steps towards equality and citizenship for that oppressed minority. Unfortunately, this marginally more enlightened legislation often did not mirror (and was frequently subverted by) popular Australian views and attitudes.

Finally, World War II, like so many other catalysts for change in Aboriginal/white relations, was international in origin. From the outset of the Depression until the victory over Japan, foreign forces impinged both directly and indirectly upon Aboriginal Australians, whether for good or ill. Perhaps the final contradiction of this era of ironies is the fact that so many Australians have been unaware of the extent to which the domestic issue of Aboriginal Affairs has been (and still is) viewed, outside its shores, as an international one. Again, perspective is the key. It is also fascinating to observe the number of different perspectives on the Aboriginal theme in the literature of the same 1929-1945 era, to be discussed in the next chapter.

Some observers have alleged that, just as certain conferences or pieces of legislation reflect a turning point in the black/white race relations of the Depression and war years, some literary works are also representative of the same phenomenon. In both cases, many commentators have fallen into the trap of being both overly enthusiastic and premature with their praise. As Stanner has remarked, these so-called turning points during the 1929-1945 era resulted from the labour of a small, enlightened, and progressive elite of individuals and were well received during the period only by likeminded Australians: 'It was a case of the faithful preaching to the converted about a "revolution" which in fact had arrived only for them'.⁶⁹ It was to be many years before the majority of Australians became aware of this revolution; even longer before they gave it their support.

Notes

- 1 Jack Horner, *Vote Ferguson for Aboriginal Freedom*, (Sydney, 1974), p. 29.
- 2 C.D. Rowley, *Outcasts in White Australia*, (Ringwood, Vic., 1972), p. 81.
- 3 In fairness it must be noted that, in relative terms, some White Australians had 'further to fall' economically during the Depression and therefore suffered greatly during those years. But this does not negate the fact that Black Australians remained the poorest group of the Australian populace during the period.
- 4 Rowley, *The Destruction of Aboriginal Society*, (Canberra, 1970), p. 281.
- 5 W.E.H. Stanner, 'The Aborigines (1938)', in *White Man Got No Dreaming*, (Canberra, 1979), p. 19.
- 6 Richard Broome, *Aboriginal Australians: Black Response to White Dominance, 1788–1980*, (Sydney, 1982), p. 143. The estimates of 1788 population have since been challenged by N.G. Butlin in his *Our Original Aggression*, (Sydney, 1983), who suggested substantially higher figures. Whatever the truth of Butlin's claims, the figures quoted here derive from the estimate of A.R. Radcliffe-Brown in *The Official Yearbook of the Commonwealth of Australia*, (Canberra, 1930), and represent the best opinion of that period.
- 7 Peter Biskup, *Not Slaves, Not Citizens*, (St. Lucia, 1973), p. 66; Broome, *Aboriginal Australians*, p. 160.
- 8 See, for example, Biskup, *Not Slaves*, p. 84.
- 9 Broome, *Aboriginal Australians*, p. 164.
- 10 See Rowley, *The Destruction*, pp. 290-297. R.M. and CH. Berndt also examine the Tuckiar episode in detail in their *Arnhem Land: Its History and Its People*, (Melbourne, 1954), pp. 134-152. See also A.P. Elkin's 'Aboriginal Evidence and Justice in North Australia', *Oceania*, vol. 17, no. 3, March 1947, pp. 173-210, especially pp.181-182.
- 11 Broome, *Aboriginal Australians*, p. 165.
- 12 *ibid.*, p. 165.
- 13 Stanner, 'The Aborigines (1938)', p. 15.
- 14 Broome, *Aboriginal Australians*, p. 161.
- 15 Stanner, 'The Aborigines (1938)', p. 7ff.

- 16 *ibid.*, p. 14.
- 17 Bleakley was the Queensland Chief Protector of Aborigines when he surveyed the Territory in 1929.
- 18 Broome, *Aboriginal Australians*, p. 162.
- 19 Rowley, *The Destruction*, p. 304.
- 20 Resolution passed in the proceedings of *Aboriginal Welfare – Initial Conference of Commonwealth and State Aboriginal Authorities*, (Canberra, 1937), p. 2.
- 21 Stanner raises this point in ‘The Aborigines (1938)’, p. 14.
- 22 Biskup, Rowley, and Paul Hasluck in his *Black Australians*, (Melbourne, 1942), are arguably all guilty of this over-emphasis.
- 23 Peter Read, ‘A History of the Wiradjuri People’, Ph.D thesis, (Canberra, 1983), p. 167.
- 24 Broome, *Aboriginal Australians*, p. 166.
- 25 Jack Horner, *Vote Ferguson for Aboriginal Freedom*, (Sydney, 1973).
- 26 Broome, *Aboriginal Australians*, p. 167.
- 27 Quoted in Broome, *Aboriginal Australians*, p. 167.
- 28 *ibid.*, p. 167.
- 29 Horner, *Vote Ferguson*, pp. 56-71.
- 30 W.E.H. Stanner, ‘After the Dreaming’, in *White Man Got No Dreaming*, (Canberra, 1979), p. 206.
- 31 *ibid.*, p. 205.
- 32 Biskup, *Not Slaves*, p. 93.
- 33 K.A. MacKirdy in R.W. Winks, ed., *The Historiography of the British Empire-Commonwealth*, (Durham, N.C.,1966), p. 170 (note).
- 34 D.J. Mulvaney, ‘The Australian Aborigines 1606-1929: Opinion and Fieldwork’, in *Historical Studies: Selected Articles*, Part 2, (Melbourne, 1964), p. 56.
- 35 ‘Editorial’, *Oceania*, vol.1, no. 1, April, 1930, p. 2.
- 36 Mulvaney, ‘The Australian Aborigines’, p. 56.
- 37 Stanner, ‘The Aborigines (1938)’, p. 19.

- 38 Biskup, *Not Slaves*, p. 92.
- 39 Biskup, *Not Slaves*, pp. 180-181ff.
- 40 *ibid.*, p. 179. The figure has been converted from pounds to dollars.
- 41 Broome, *Aboriginal Australians*, p. 104.
- 42 *ibid.*, p. 115.
- 43 Biskup, *Not Slaves*, p. 176.
- 44 *ibid.*, pp.175-176; Broome *Aboriginal Australians*, p. 108.
- 45 Biskup, *Not Slaves*, p. 181.
- 46 Stanner, 'After The Dreaming', in *White Man Got No Dreaming*, p. 211.
- 47 Read, 'A History of the Wiradjuri People', pp. 215-216.
- 48 C.D. Rowley, *The Destruction*, (Canberra, 1970), p. 337.
- 49 *ibid.*, p. 339.
- 50 Hannah Middleton, *But Now We Want the Land Back*, (Sydney, 1977), p. 73.
- 51 Robert A. Hall, 'The Army and the Aborigines, World War II', unpublished MA (Qual.) thesis, (Canberra, 1979), p. 2.
- 52 Broome, *Aboriginal Australians*, p. 169.
- 53 Broome, *Aboriginal Australians*, p. 137.
- 54 Hall, 'The Army and the Aborigines'. See, in particular, Chapter Five – 'The Determinants of Army Attitudes' – especially pp. 93-94.
- 55 *ibid.*, p. 32.
- 56 *ibid.*, p. 108.
- 57 *ibid.*, p. 32.
- 58 *ibid.*, p. 24.
- 59 It was reported in late 1983 that the Australian government had 'taken action to rectify underpayments in salaries totalling \$7.4 million to about 800 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander World War II veterans and their beneficiaries', Department of Aboriginal Affairs, *Aboriginal Newsletter*, no. 130, November, 1983, p. 1.
- 60 Harry C. Gordon, *The Embarrassing Australian: The Story of An Aboriginal Warrior*, (Melbourne, 1962), p. 47. The emphasis is mine.

- 61 In his play, *Kullark*, Jack Davis explores some of the options open to Western Australian Aborigines immediately following World War II, and particularly emphasises the Aboriginal ex-serviceman, Alec Yorlah, who asserts his opposition to unjust white authority. See, for example, Act Two, Scene Five, of *Kullark* in *Kullark/The Dreamers*, (Sydney, 1982), pp. 57-64. *Kullark* is discussed in detail in Chapter Nine.
- 62 Middleton, *But Now We Want*, p. 83.
- 63 Biskup, *Not Slaves*, p. 210.
- 64 Len Watson, '1945: Enter the Black Radical', *The National Times Magazine*, April 1, 1974, p. 5.
- 65 See, in particular, the questionnaires completed by Mr. S. Gela and Mr J. Mooka in the course of Hall's research for 'The Army and the Aborigines, World War II'. These are contained in volume two of the thesis, housed in the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies Library, Canberra, ms. 1294.
- 66 Biskup, *Not Slaves*, p. 196.
- 67 Broome, *Aboriginal Australians*, pp. 170-171.
- 68 Rowley, *Destruction*, pp. 328-332.
- 69 Stanner, 'After the Dreaming', in *White Man Got No Dreaming*, p. 211.