

Anthropology on Trial

Chris Kenny, *Women's Business*, Duffy & Snellgrove, Sydney, 1996

Reviewed by Roger Sandall

IF men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences.' So said a long-forgotten sociologist, and one way of approaching the Hindmarsh Island bridge saga is to see it as a perverse attempt to 'define a situation as real' regardless of the awkward facts uncovered along the way, so that 'good' interests triumph and 'bad' interests fail.

The title of Kenny's book is taken from the memorable words of consultant anthropologist Lindy Warrell: 'it would be nice if there were some women's business'. Seldom can wishful thinking have had such dire results. In Chris Kenny's invaluable detailed account of the affair we see how the overwhelming desire to achieve certain 'real consequences', in this case the blocking of a developer's marina plans, meant that truth was sacrificed; how as a result of Warrell's provocative hint suitable ethnographic 'evidence' was fabricated; how in the struggle to define the situation a conspiratorial misrepresentation was endorsed at the level of former Prime Minister Keating's cabinet, anyone querying these events being denounced in parliament and the media as a racist redneck. The maze of interests, personnel, and activities here laid bare is dauntingly complicated. A good deal more than just a work of reportorial enquiry, the portrait of modern Australia to be found in *Women's Business* is as intriguing as its social analysis. We are all in Mr Kenny's debt.

Where did the fraud start? Not, certainly, with the Aborigines who were opportunistically recruited to the cause, many of whom acted in good faith, and some of whose lives were made a misery. Rather, it began in the late 1980s as the desire of a combination of New Class urbanites with secluded weekenders, along with resident retirees, to preserve the lifestyle they were accustomed to. In their view, a bridge would open up what had once been a privileged private reserve. Then, after three years of complicated financing and development applications and environmental impact statements, including an anthropological report to the effect that no surviving Aboriginal mythology even referred to Hindmarsh Island, and none of which drew Aboriginal objections, the South Australian parliament decided to go ahead and build the bridge. The opponents now faced a supreme challenge. Only the 'sacred site' gambit was left. So one of the Weekendenders said to Davey Thomason, an organiser for the CFMEU (whose most exciting public exploit was the smashing in of the glass doors to the Commonwealth parliament in August 1996, followed by the bloodstained oration he gave on camera), 'Let's see if we can get some Aborigines down from Murray Bridge' (p. 47); a conservationist named Sally Francis in the Adelaide Hills did just that; in March 1994 aforementioned consultant anthropologist Lindy Warrell momentarily hinted that 'it would be nice if there was some women's business' (p. 71); and at a meeting in October Aboriginal leader Henry

Rankine raised a laugh from his audience when he said that, although he didn't know of any sites, 'I'm sure if we have a look around we can find something' (p. 51). But fraud requires unusually strong nerves and single-mindedness. Only when Doreen Kartinyeri was added to the plot in April 1995 were these available. In 1983 she had said that she 'didn't know much about the culture, customs and language' of the Ngarindjerri (p. 164). Yet by 1995 the media had transformed her into an authority on such matters. It was she who produced the required synthesis of pseudo-ethnographic elements: a tale involving uterine waters and birth passages and who knows what else, much of it dreamed up by men who had been gazing over-imaginatively at a map.

Kenny is commendably even-handed, especially considering the insult and intimidation he himself had to endure in the course of his inquiries. He gives Kartinyeri appropriate credit for the tracing of Aboriginal genealogies which brought her academic recognition. He describes what he calls 'the terrible legacy of dispossession' and its effects on Aboriginal life (p. 71). He maintains a proper distance from developers Tom and Wendy Chapman, whose marina plans were the original cause of the dispute. He leaves it an open question whether the claims of conservation or of development better serve the interests of the people of Hindmarsh Island, who were themselves divided on the matter. The unusual realignments of position on Hindmarsh Island which were to be seen in both the South Australian Liberal and Labor Parties — Labor and Bannon first advocating the bridge while the Liberals, including Ian McLachlan, opposed it — are clearly described, and McLachlan's later role in the famous 'envelopes affair' which led to his shadow ministerial resignation is portrayed as the imprudent thing it was. The author notes three occasions on which reports of public interest were not released (that by anthropologist Rod Lucas in 1990, and both the Jacobs and Draper reports of 1994) and includes material from Lucas providing an early warning that the marina development 'would provide a chance for the Aboriginal community to exert its identity and authority', and that 'the potential advantages to developers [would be] necessarily played off against the political interests of contemporary Aboriginal groups' (p. 31).

But there is no doubt where Kenny's sympathies lie: with the 14 women who told the truth in the face of threats and ostracism; with the two anthropologists who emerge with credit from the affair, Philip Clarke and Philip Jones of the Anthropology Division of the South Australian Museum; and with the tragic figure of Doug Milera, the Aboriginal man who approached Kenny and blew the whistle, who as a party to the plot confirmed evidence already painstakingly gathered from other sources, and who was afterwards brow-beaten into an ambivalent retraction of his confession, only to be portrayed in the media as 'a drunken Aboriginal who would sell out his friends for a few dollars' (p. 207). Finally, Kenny's sympathy is with Royal Commissioner Iris Stevens, without whose patient hearings the truth could hardly have come out, the 'definition of the situation' otherwise likely to prevail being a fiction strenuously created by a coalition of protest groups and their media friends — especially the ABC.

Chris Kenny is himself a well-known reporter for Channel Ten in Adelaide. Vilified by all and sundry for arranging and broadcasting the interview with the 'dissident women' which exposed what was going on, he notes that 'considered, expert opinions were never allowed to dominate the public perception' of the Royal Commission, and that 'it would have been difficult for those of the public who relied on [the ABC] to understand the Commission proceedings' (p. 226). The ABC distinguished itself by its usual one-sidedness, by refusing to have anything to do with the dissident women, and, when it did finally deign to show one on camera, it allowed a young Canadian reporter to inform her sharply that her testimony was turning Aboriginal traditions upside down. An ABC television program by Stuart Littlemore of 'unprecedented length and virulence' tried to destroy Kenny (p. 209). The entire ABC coverage was predictably slanted, the issue being reported as one of 'cash versus culture', in which a Royal Commission was heartlessly 'pursuing Christian truth, possibly at the expense of another culture' (p. 189). Though it seems that in the view of one prominent Catholic the truth was irrelevant: 'Even if the story is true', Dr Damien Mead said to Kenny, 'you shouldn't be doing it' (p. 228).

For its part, the Uniting Church declared that the Royal Commission and author Kenny were putting Aboriginal beliefs on trial: 'The dominant Western culture will now stand in judgement over Ngarrindjeri culture and belief' (p. 188). But the Church was wrong. It was anthropology and the credibility of anthropologists which were on trial, and neither looked good in court. When faced with questions of truth or falsehood, the discipline itself was seen to equivocate: reality lay 'somewhere in between'. Endless pages of incoherent anthropological testimony called in question not so much the intellectual integrity of the witnesses as their mental capacity. Then there were the revealing comments of Lindy Warren broadcast on the ABC. Finding that her innocently casual invitation to fraud ('it would be nice if there were some women's business') had been picked up by the media, she said 'I've made a party joke of it ever since' (p. 226). This perfectly catches the tone of flippancy, cynicism, and childish irresponsibility which prevails across wide stretches of anthropological social life. What's a few million dollars? Or the lives of those Aborigines who stood up to be counted in the face of what they knew was fraud? The best treatment of this topic is, however, Ron Brunton's 'The Hindmarsh Island Bridge and the Credibility of Australian Anthropology' (*Anthropology Today*, Vol. 12, No. 4, August 1996). He says at the outset that the bridge affair 'has become a turning point for Aboriginal heritage claims in Australia'. This is true. Anyone wishing to know how that turning point was reached should read Kenny's admirable case history.

After teaching in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Sydney for 20 years, Roger Sandall retired in 1994.