ETHNOHISTORY IN AUSTRALIA

by

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ABSTRACT

The status of studies of the ethnohistory of Australian Aborigines is critically reviewed and suggestions are made for future work in this direction.

The hostility aroused by the word ethnohistory, which elsewhere has offended the sensibilities of conventional historians and anthropologists alike, has not, so far, been provoked in Australia. There have been no published denunciations of the discipline and its methods from either the historians or the anthropologists; rather, people who have quietly suggested that it is ethnohistory that they are writing or want to write, have encountered smiles and raised eyebrows, or have been asked how and where they intend to get a University job. This mildness has been apparent, not because Australian historians and anthropologists are more tolerant and flexible, or less jealous of the purity of their disciplines, than their counterparts in other countries, but because ethnohistorical work in Australia has barely begun. The bulk of the vast literature on the Australian Aborigines, which ranges from the observations of early explorers like Torres to the most sophisticated contemporary anthropological articles, monographs and books, has been innocent of emphases which could be called ethnohistorical.[1]

D. J. Mulvaney's brilliant survey of the literature on the Aborigines, which lays bare the assumptions and methods which guided scholarly interest in them from the seventeenth century until 1930, shows clearly that the line of development in this literature was from casual observation, to unscientific

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speculation, to analytical fieldwork.[2] Not until very recently have scholars attempted to work on the recorded history of the Aborigines since their first contacts with Europeans. Marie Reay's essay on "The Background of Alien Impact," published in 1965, is a noteworthy attempt to outline the broad trends in that history.[3] But, resting as it does on the very slight amount of work done on Aboriginal-European relations at the time of writing (and none of it really ethnohistorical), it is, necessarily, merely a very incomplete and arbitrary account of the history of *some* Aborigines in *some* parts of Australia at *some* times since the arrival of the Europeans. Nor does the essay make any suggestions as to how histories of the Aborigines, comparable to, say, those of the American Indians, could best be written. Indeed, Dr. Reay, as an anthropologist, was not concerned to make any such suggestions, but it is interesting that, in an essay which is historical in intent and method, she shows little or no dissatisfaction with the state of Aboriginal historical studies.

The simple fact is that there is as yet no history of an Aboriginal tribe, or of the Aborigines of any of the Australian states, or indeed any published historical study which keeps the Aborigines firmly in the foreground rather than the settlers, missionaries, or policy makers who had dealings with them. There are many reasons why this is so. Firstly, the science of anthropology, from which ethnohistory has sprung, has, in Australia, been dominated from its beginnings in the 1930s by the functionalist emphases of English social anthropology. As a result, detailed works of varying quality on Aboriginal social organization, kinship and religion are as many as studies of Aboriginal reaction to Europeans and change are few. Australian anthropologists have been, above all, field-workers, and unlike Americans, have made very little use of documentary material in their studies. Also, the excesses of early amateur ethnologists who sought to trace the origins of the Aborigines to Asia, India, Egypt and beyond, helped to discourage more serious and rigorous historical interest in them.

For quite other reasons, historians have paid scant attention to the Aborigines. In southern Australia, the area on which most historical work has been concentrated, the Aborigines were reduced in numbers so quickly that they had little chance to play a part in the new order wrought by the Europeans and so have not attracted the attention of historians. The resistance the Aborigines offered to the imposition of this new order and their fortunes under it have not been studied. Again, the comparatively small numbers of the Aborigines, and their lack of firm political structures and temporal leaders, meant that the resistance offered to white intrusion was rather less strong and protracted than in America. No pitched battles were fought and no Sitting Bulls or Geronimos appeared to challenge and interest the historians.

Perhaps a further deterrent to historians was the fact that, before World War II, it was widely assumed that the Aborigines were a dying race. This theory was most forcefully expressed in Daisy Bates' *The Passing of the Aborigines,* published in London in 1938. The Aborigines were not then, and are not now, a dying race, and the premature grieving for them which was so widespread has

been much criticized by A.P. Elkin and others for blighting initiative and energy in Aboriginal policy making.[4] But, while the theory that the Aborigines were doomed held sway, historians did not think to concern themselves with Aboriginal history, or, perhaps, thought it best to wait until the story was ended. Indeed, even in the best domestic histories being written now, the tendency is to dismiss the Aborigines in a phrase or a paragraph, or to sentimentalize about the interest of their customs, the beauty of their language, and the inevitability of their replacement.[5]

What had been published on Aboriginal history (apart from several histories of Native Policy)[6] by 1965 is noted by Reay, but examination shows it to consist of: a thirty year old thesis which devotes four pages to consideration of Aboriginal culture before plunging into a vague settler-centric narrative;[7] two admirable records of Aborigines' reactions to, and fortunes in, the culture contact situation;[8] a study by anthropologists of European-Aboriginal relations in South Australia which is very general and historically inadequate;[9] and a schematization of the processes of Aboriginal reaction to the European order which is impressive but again general, not enlightening in regard to those states where the Aborigines were decimated swiftly, and which sees "assimilation" as the probable final and desirable stage.[10] It is unlikely that this will be the final stage and it is not now universally thought desirable, especially by the Aborigines.

The time has certainly come for Australian ethnohistorians to draw on the vast ethnographic work in existence and, by collating it with written documentary material and by conducting fieldwork where possible, to write Aboriginal history. Happily there are some signs, even since the publication of Reay's essay, that this is being done, particularly in the form of dissertations for higher degrees. Diane Barwick's "A Little More than Kin: Regional Affiliation and Group Identity Among Aboriginal Migrants in Melbourne,"[11] though the work of an anthropologist, is very largely a history of Aborigines. M.C. Hartwig's "White settlement and aboriginal inhabitants of the Alice Springs district,"[12] is avowedly historical, as is my own "Aborigines and Europeans in western Victoria, from first contacts to 1860."[13] These are beginnings, but there is much work with a closer focus to be done. A few anthropologists have begun to show the way here: Malcolm Calley's essay "Pentecostalism among the Bandjalang," with its confident blend of information on past and present with reference to this virulent Fundamentalism among these Aborigines, indicates that good tribal histories could be written by ethnohistorians. Another essay in the collection to which Calley's belongs, Jeremy Beckett's "Aborigines, Alcohol, and Assimilation," employs historical explanations as aids to the understanding of Aborigines today.[14]

There are many other subjects for study which come to mind. The Aborigines have been subjected to considerable missionary effort, and various missions were established in areas (such as on the Daly river in northern Australia) where anthropological work has been done which could be used in retrospect to

evaluate the impact of such missions on the physical and spiritual life of the Aborigines. Although as noted before there were no Aboriginal leaders of the order found in America, there have been noteworthy individuals such as Sandamara in Western Australia, Nemarluk in the Northern Territory and Koort Kirrup in western Victoria, whose careers could be investigated ethnohistorically. There are no doubt other historically important Aborigines, and it is to be hoped that the editors of the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* continue to include articles on prominent Aborigines as the series progresses.[15]

Also, the histories of the Native Police Corps which were formed in several Australian states in the nineteenth century remain to be studied. In nineteenth-century western Victoria, the Native Police were largely responsible for the pacification of the Aborigines in the area. In other parts of Australia, Native Police are still important and there has been no study of them, nor of the celebrated "blacktrackers." There are living informants who could tell much about these activities and about the reactions of other Aborigines to them.

In particular areas of Australia, such as along the Glenelg River in western Victoria, in the Kimberley district of Western Australia, and on the Cape York Peninsula in Queensland, Aborigines offered more spirited resistance to the Europeans than elsewhere; investigation of their culture might help to reveal how and why. The whole subject of the history of European employment of Aborigines in all parts of Australia is unstudied. The common view, that the Aborigines have been and are poor workers, should be investigated historically to determine how the Aborigines were introduced to European work, and what incentives and opportunities were given them.

Also lacking is a history of Aboriginal depopulation. Missions and government reserves and protectorates kept records of births and deaths, symptoms and diseases, and rations issued, which could be analysed to help to make clearer the relative importance of those oft-quoted factors—drink, disease, and detribalization—as causes of the decline in Aboriginal population since the arrival of Europeans.

As a last suggestion, it is worthy of note that Mulvaney considers that the recent publication of the journals and papers of the "conciliator" of the Aborigines of Tasmania, George Augustus Robinson,[16] "possibly doubles our knowledge of the Tasmanian aborigines, while presenting them as vibrant human beings, not as relict evolutionary fossils."[17] This new information could make possible a fresh appraisal of the Tasmanian "Black War" and the extermination of the Tasmanians which Clive Turnbull dealt with twenty years ago in a treatment which was necessarily one-sided and thin due to the dearth of material on the Tasmanian Aborigines.[18]

This raises the question of the availability of written records to the ethnohistorian who wishes to (a) construct a picture of the culture of the Aborigines at the time of their contact with Europeans, which may then be used to gain an understanding of their first and later reactions to European culture, and, (b) use the written descriptions and reports of settlers, missionaries, and

administrators to document the history of the people who were evangelized, administered, and protected. In the northern parts of Australia, and in the centre and to some extent the west, anthropological investigation began early enough to record the essential elements of Aboriginal culture when it was still, more or less, a going concern. This is, unfortunately, not true of the south and east, and here the student must rely on the work of such early amateur ethnographers as A. W. Howitt, R. H. Mathews, E. M. Curr, James Dawson, and R. Brough Smyth.[19] Discriminating study of these works, aided by the insights gained from modern anthropology, does enable a relatively convincing account of the culture of the Aborigines in areas where they no longer exist to be made which can be used as an explanatory tool in writing their history.

The exploitable written records are many. There are numerous published memoirs of settlers, official papers of reserves and protectorates, and mission records. There is also much material in Parliamentary papers, particularly in the records of commissions of inquiry into Aboriginal affairs. The Aborigines identify themselves and come to life in these records if they are examined by the ethnohistorian rather than by the student of Native Policy. It is not true to say, as Reay has done, that "Governors' despatches and associated documents throw much light on the formation of official attitudes, but none on the day-to-day contacts between 'whites' and Aborigines."[20] In many cases, indeed, these "associated documents" take the form of depositions from settlers who attacked, or were attacked by, hostile Aborigines, or the statements of Aborigines themselves, or reports of sinister doings. A few examples may help to indicate that these records are not as sterile as Reay imagines. James Brack's account of the killing of Patrick Codd on May 19, 1840, by Aborigines of the Victorian Western District, illustrates well the uneasy intimacy which existed between the Aborigines and the settlers when it was becoming clear to the Aborigines that the white men had come intending to stay:

> About 10 o'clock yesterday 19th morning Mr P. Codd and I were standing near the fire in front of my tarpaulin, I was playing my bugle, when suddenly the natives appeared. Mr Codd and I immediately walked towards them, at the same time making signs to them to advance towards the men's hut. I then amused them playing the bugle, after which they came up and asked me for some "damper". I gave them a very large one which I divided equally among them - 18 in number. Patrick Rooney one of my servants then proposed to try and induce the Natives to carry out some tea tree which he had been cutting in a scrub about 300 yards from the hut. I agreed tho. reluctantly, trusting that entire confidence was established between us. We, Mr Codd, Rooney & myself, accordingly walked down to the scrub to shew them what we wanted, we took no arms with us. Within about 20 yards of the scrub Mr Codd and myself stopped; Rooney went in with 5 of the natives, presently he returned; the natives carrying some of the cut stuff – he then proceeded a second time into the scrub with the same natives, he had scarcely got in, when I heard him cry out "O God I'm murdered" at the same instant Mr

> Codd who was standing within 2 yards of me was knocked down. The Natives then struck me, and having no means of defence, I called to Mr Codd to run. I started off at the same time as fast as I could towards the hut pursued by the natives who threw spears and waddies in great numbers at me but fortunately without effect. They followed me to within about 100 yards of the hut. Having armed myself I returned to endeavour to save Mr Codd & Rooney but when I came to where Mr Codd was lying he breathed his last. Rooney had creeped out of the scrub & had swooned near Mr C. he now lies in a most dangerous condition from the wounds he then received. I forward to your Honor this description and numbers of the wounds on the body of Mr Codd. I could swear to the identity of every one of the Natives who attacked us, having repeatedly conversed with them and made them presents.[21]

The documentation of this incident does not stop there: C. W. Sievewright, Assistant Protector of Aborigines in the area concerned, recalled, when reporting on this murder, that Codd had been the overseer on a sheep station which had been attacked some time before by a party of *eighteen* Aborigines. On this occasion the Europeans had found it necessary "to fire a small swivel gun loaded with musket balls in order to alarm the natives." Sievewright thought that there was a definite connection between the two attacks and that the second was an act of vengeance.[22] This case was not concluded until two years later when *one* Aborigine named Rodger was hanged in Melbourne for the crime. At that time a newspaper expressed regret that Rodger had not been hanged at the scene of the murder as an example to the local Aborigines.[23] Perhaps the matter was not closed even then, for James Dredge, another Assistant Protector, referring to Aboriginal customs of revenge, sadly remarked on hearing of the execution that, "Among his own people the lives of several will have to be sacrificed on his account as soon as the news of his death reaches them."[24] Thus it is possible to document such incidents in fair detail, to explain them, and to trace their consequences.

Another example of the dramatic material to be found in official documents is from the other side of the coin. Dr. Watton, a Medical Officer on an Aboriginal reserve, reported on his investigation of information which had come his way:

> From the report of the men now there, and also from some of the natives at Port Fairy, it appears that the then overseer, Mr Robinson (now in Melbourne), had sent into the bush to some natives, by a man of the name of John Lyons . . . now also supposed to be in Melbourne, a quantity of what was supposed to be flour. Of this they partook, and were immediately seized with burning pains in the throat, excruciating pains in the stomach, vomiting, sinking of the abdomen and intense thirst (which are the symptoms usually produced by arsenic); and on the following morning three men, three women, and three children were dead. I cannot find that they were seen by any white person, the bodies having been immediately burnt . . . I also find that a few months ago Mr Robinson received from Port Fairy two pounds of arsenic, of

> which one pound and a half only was made over to Mr Chamberlain, now managing the station.[25]

As in the previous case discussed there was a survivor—one Aborigine had eaten some of the poisoned flour but had not died—however, as one who was "ignorant of the existence of a God or a future state",[26] her evidence was not admissable in a British court of law and so this murder went unpunished.[27]

Thus, official records of the early days of European settlement in Australia (and these are very extensive) can, if approached in the right way, take the student a lot closer to the actuality of race relations than is often thought.

The other major source of information drawn upon by the ethnohistorian, oral evidence transmitted by those who witnessed historical events or who are the preservers of traditions and memories about them, is also available in Australia. The availability of such evidence with reference to a history of Native Police in Australia has already been mentioned, but instances can be given of smaller historical subjects for which this sort of evidence may also be used. For example, at the time of World War I in a town in northwestern Victoria, Aborigines were subjected not only to the colour prejudice and discrimination which was and is found in such country towns, but also to the sort of anti-German feeling which at that time caused Muellers to become Millers and which changed the names of streets. This was because fifty years before a Moravian mission had been established near where the town subsequently grew. This mission devoted itself to the welfare of the Aborigines. It had ceased to operate some years before the outbreak of war, but the missionaries had left many of the Aborigines they had cared for with sympathy and regard for Germans. The development and form taken by this dual prejudice could make a fascinating ethnohistorical study which could draw on written records, newspaper files, and the memories of the black and white people who were involved. Without doubt, there are more such situations peculiarly amenable to study by ethnohistorical methods.

The sources are abundant, and the list of possible subjects for study could be made very long. There is a need, for example, for area studies of Aboriginal-European relations if a composite historical picture is ever to be made—and the beginnings are promising. How the interest in Aboriginal history has arisen is uncertain; it has probably been stimulated by awareness of the excellent work done on American Indian history, and possibly represents a reaction to the increased publicity being given to Aborigines and their problems in Australia. What is really important is that the development be welcomed by anthropologists and historians, and that these beginnings should not be blighted by controversy and confusion about the meaning and methods of ethnohistory, nor be damned by faint praise. If the definition of ethnohistory liberally stated by this journal—"original research in the documentary history of the culture and movements of primitive peoples, and related problems of broader scope"—can prevail, the

studies will reveal the history of the Australian Aborigines to be no less interesting than that of the squatters on their stations, the merchants in their towns, and the politicians at their trade.

NOTES

1. A great many articles on Aborigines have appeared in the journal *Oceania,* which began publication in 1930. Emeritus Professor A. P. Elkin has done herculean anthropological work in Australia as may be seen from the bibliography of his writings in Berndt, R. M., and C. H. Berndt (1965). The Berndts, too, have done a great deal of fieldwork and have published extensively. See in particular Berndt, R. M., and C. H. Berndt (1964).
2. Mulvaney (1964).
3. Berndt, R. M., and C. H. Berndt (1965: 377-395).
4. Elkin (1964).
5. The much-praised social history of the Victorian Western District, the book by Margaret Kiddle (1961), is an example. In almost every other way an admirable history of the district, its treatment of the Aborigines is its greatest fault. The account given of them is inaccurate and sentimental.
6. Such as Foxcroft (1941) and Hasluck (1942).
7. Hassell (1966).
8. Berndt, C. H., and R. M. Berndt (1951); Stanner (1960).
9. Berndt, R. M., and C. H. Berndt (1951).
10. Elkin (1951).
11. Barwick (1963).
12. Hartwig (1966).
13. Corris (1966).
14. Both essays are in Reay (1965).
15. Two volumes, covering the period 1788 to 1850, have so far been published and these have included the biographies of five Aborigines (Australian Dictionary of Biography 1966-1967).
16. Robinson (1966). Robinson subsequently held the office of Chief Protector of Aborigines in the Port Phillip District from 1839 until the abolition of the Protectorate ten years later.
17. Mulvaney (1966).
18. Turnbull (1948).
19. For a review of the value of the work of Howitt, Dawson, Curr and Smyth, see Corris (1966). For a discussion and assessment of Mathews' work, see Elkin (1963).
20. Berndt, R. M., and C. H. Berndt (1965: 377).
21. James Brack to La Trobe, May 20 (Superintendent of the Port Phillip District 1840: Box 41).
22. Sievewright to G. A. Robinson, May 28 (Superintendent of the Port Phillip District 1840: Box 41).
23. Portland Mercury (1842).
24. Dredge (1839-1843: 265).
25. Watton to G. A. Robinson, December 10, 1842 (Great Britain . . . 1844: 296).
26. Writing to Governor Gipps to inform him that the act passed in the colony of New South Wales to permit Aborigines to give evidence in a court of law was disallowed, Lord John Russell, then Colonial Secretary, enclosed legal opinions in his despatch which stated that to allow people in this benighted condition to give evidence would be "contrary to the principles of British Jurisprudence." See Enclosure no. 1, in

Russell to Gipps, August 11, 1840 (Australia. *Parliament:* Series I, Vol. 20, p. 756).

27. See G. A. Robinson to the New South Wales Colonial Secretary, February 20, 1843 (Great Britain . . . 1844: 296).

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