ABORIGINAL AUSTRALIANS AND THE BICENTENNIAL HISTORY PROJECT

John Mulvaney

On 22 May 1980 a symposium was held at the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies Biennial Meeting to discuss the Bicentennial History 1788-1988 project, in relation to its Aboriginal component. It was convened by Diane Barwick, Isabel McBryde and John Mulvaney. It was a positive meeting at which many ideas and suggestions were expressed.

Ken Colbung, Acting Chairman of the Institute, opened the meeting and gave the project his warm support. He was followed by Professor Ken Inglis, General Editor of the proposed volumes, who explained the scope of the project and the major role that Aboriginal history should have in it ('a social history about sorts of people who haven't had a go as yet'). He outlined the concept of 'slice history' whereby volumes will concentrate on particular years at fifty year intervals (1788, 1838, 1888, 1938, 1939-1988). It is expected that the 1988 Bicentenary will generate a great deal of narrative history so it is hoped the 'slice' approach will result in a challengingly different series.

Each volume is planned to be 150,000 words in length, with 100 illustrations. While the structure of volumes 1 and 5 is still undecided, the 'slice' approach for 1838, 1888 and 1938 is settled policy. Volumes need to be in editorial hands in 1984. In addition to this series other separate volumes are planned which will allow scope for Aboriginal themes, including some which may be excluded from the main series because of its format. These volumes include an historical atlas, a volume of statistical data and a single volume narrative survey of Australian history.

John Mulvaney presented some general thoughts about the series. He emphasised that the European history section in the 1788 volume, under Geoffrey Blainey's convenorship, could expect no more than about one fifth of that volume. He suggested that a 'slice' approach was a possibility with, say, one fifth of the volume devoted to Pleistocene (ice age) Australia, focused upon 17880 B.C. (but utilising Pleistocene data from any period and so avoiding the problem of change through time). One tenth of the space might be devoted to 1788 B.C. (post-glacial times), while the balance of the book would portray Aboriginal Australia in A.D. 1788.

In a stimulating session, Bill Rosser and Wayne Atkinson emphasised the tremendous potential for research into oral history, closely related to documentary evidence. Eve Fesl demonstrated the relevance of linguistic evidence for history and for tracing movements of people and reminded the audience of the need for further research into languages often described as 'lost'. There was value also in studying changes in the meaning of words through time.

Richard Wright, Carol Cooper, Athol Chase and Peter Lauer discussed the varieties of material evidence for Aboriginal history — including skin cloaks, photographs, museum artefacts, Aboriginal use of patent medicines, artists who adapted traditional art to new mediums, such as paper and other subjects.

The speakers and other participants raised many important issues, relating either to the philosophy and format guiding the volumes or to problems requiring greater research during the years to come. Some of these issues are listed below, although they are not set down in any order of importance or relevance.

General Problems

1. How best to integrate Aboriginal history in all volumes? Note that Aboriginal history is not simply contact history, featuring Europeans. Nor is it the

story only of those Aborigines who succeeded in adapting to European demands.

2. Should each volume contain relevant 'beyond-the-frontier' ethnographic reconstructions, or should much of this belong in the 'Australia in 1788' section, (e.g. should Victoria feature mainly in 1838; the Kimberleys in 1888, and if so, will this involve undue repetition)?
3. Is it valid to use late nineteenth century or twentieth century evidence in the 1788 section, or did changes distort the scene too much? If it is not so used, will the 1788 volume be forced to concentrate only on Aborigines of the Sydney region?
4. Should a volume have a few, several, or many authors?
5. Given the volume of maps on Australian history, which maps and how much detail should relate to Aborigines?
6. Obviously archaeological and ethnographic data are basic sources, but, to quote Athol Chase, we 'must avoid writing a history of objects and must relate it to people and events'.
7. Should different authors, starting from diverse theoretical standpoints, write on the same general problem?

Specific Problems

1. Major campaign on oral history.
2. Concentration on linguistics used historically.
3. Major research on tracing and evaluating visual sources such as paintings and photographs on a regional basis.
4. More research on 'transitional' society, especially for the evidence contained for contact influences in art and material culture.
5. Need to compile mini-biographies to illustrate the diversity of experience of the 'common' Aboriginal people.
6. Research into epidemics.
7. The spread and influence of 'biological' imports, such as domesticated plants and animals, weeds, diseases of flora and fauna.
8. Aboriginal architecture, transition of adjustment to a European built environment.
9. The role of pastoralism in the knowledge system of Aborigines.
10. Aboriginal oral history as a source for European history, especially trepang, sandalwood, pearling, buffalo shooting industries; also for Afghans and Chinese.
11. Aborigines and the two World Wars.
12. The Depression and Aboriginal society.
13. Aboriginal statements of their perception of what prehistory is about.
14. Detailed reconstruction or regional differences, particularly using ethno-historic and ethnographic sources. Should cultural diversity be highlighted by a volume of plates?
15. The contrasting impact of Aboriginal technology (and fire) on the environment with that of the European; given environmental controls, the different ecological solutions.
16. Need to overcome the distortion in existing museum collections of artefacts — majority are weapons, very few deal with daily routine economic and social life.

17. Value of using artefacts in field situations as 'triggering objects' (Athol Chase's phrase) to assist recall by informants.

Advice

Your suggestions on any of the above issues, or on any other matters are invited. Send your letters to Diane Barwick, this journal's editor. It is proposed to hold a special meeting to draw up planning guidelines at the Brisbane ANZAAS Congress in May 1981. Further details on the project as a whole may be obtained from the Assistant General Editor, Dr S.G. Foster, Department of History, Research School of Social Sciences, Australian National University.

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