'A RAPE OF THE SOUL SO PROFOUND': SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE DISPERSAL POLICY IN NEW SOUTH WALES

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In the late 1920s and early 1930s the whites of southern Australia were alarmed by a series of sensational events in the Northern Territory. After the Coniston Massacre of 1928, perhaps the most notorious of these was the murder of a Constable McColl in August 1933, allegedly by an Aborigine named Tuckiar. The southerners were horrified that some Territorians, including the police, were ready to mount a punitive expedition rather than search for and arrest the culprit. Public protest at length prevailed upon the Commonwealth government, which accepted an offer by the Church Missionary Society to send an expedition to parley with the alleged killer.¹

By mid-1934 the Northern Territory was in turmoil again. Scarcely had Tuckiar been arrested and brought to Darwin than the southerners were moved to a fresh expression of dismay at the rough and ready Northern Territory judicial system.² In May 1934 the same Judge Wells who was later to convict Tuckiar sentenced eight Aboriginal men to death for the murder of two white traders. The effect of the savage sentences on the south was immediate. Over one hundred individuals and organisations petitioned Prime Minister Lyons to commute the death penalty.³ In New South Wales, twenty-five organisations sent letters of protest. They included such improbable associates as the Australasian Society of Patriots, the New South Wales Council of Churches, the New South Wales Taxi Owners and Drivers Association, the International Labour League, the Punchbowl Unemployed and Distress Association and the Archbishop of Sydney.

In view of the attitude of most New South Wales whites towards the Aborigines of their own state, the reasoning on which the protests was based was as remarkable as the diversity of the authors. There were references to the murders as 'judicial

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¹ This paper has been prepared from several sources: from fieldwork in Wiradjuri country in central-western New South Wales, from the preparation of a holdings-list of the records of the Aborigines Protection and Welfare Boards in the State Archives, and as a staff-member of Link-Up. The quotation in the title is drawn from Gilbert 1977:2: 'It is my thesis that Aboriginal Australia underwent a rape of the soul so profound that the blight continues in the minds of most blacks today'. For a brief review of events in the Northern Territory at this time see Rowley 1972:290-297.

² In August 1933 Tuckiar was arrested for the murder of a policeman at Woodah Island. After a sensational trial he was found guilty and condemned to death. Shortly afterwards the verdict was overturned by the High Court of Australia.

³ The file containing the correspondence of the protesters is A1/34/8281, Australian Archives (AA), Canberra.

executions' and appeals to former atrocities by the whites. The New South Wales Council of Churches denounced the sentences as 'a crime upon our civilisation'.⁴ William McKenzie, Commissioner of the Salvation Army in New South Wales, wrote:

You are quite aware that their standards and ideals are very much different to those of the white race. They have standards down along the ages passed on to them. Doubtless, they looked upon those two white men as intruders into their particular domain, and so they felt they could do none other than kill them as enemies who had landed in their country.⁵

Many of the protesters showed some awareness of the validity of non-European cultural and ethical systems which, even if they were considered inferior, were conceded to be essentially comparable. Even if Aborigines were not to be allowed to conform to their own codes unhindered, it was argued that cultural factors should be considered as mitigating evidence by the courts.

The Lyons government could not ignore the torrent of condemnation. In July 1934 the sentences were commuted to life imprisonment. Some Sydney citizens still were dissatisfied. The Sydney Men's Bible Class resolved that all Aborigines serving life sentences in the Northern Territory who had been convicted of defending their women against white men should be released.⁶

Throughout this debate there was scarcely a mention of discrimination against New South Wales Aborigines. In fact a senior member of the Society for the Protection of Native Races, Bishop Coadjutor Kirkby, implied that southern Aborigines were of no concern at all when he told the Annual General Meeting of 1933, 'Whatever wrongs have been done in Central, Northern and Western Australia, are wrongs in which we all have some part, either directly or indirectly'.⁷ Yet it was not as though there was nothing to protest about in New South Wales. The decade 1930-1939 was perhaps the worst of the eighty-six year administration of the Aborigines Protection and Welfare Boards, an administration which was *in toto* very bad indeed.

Since 1909, when the Aborigines Protection Act was made law, conditions on the Board's reserves had steadily declined. In March 1916 the free issue of blankets to Aborigines was withdrawn.⁸ By May the issue of meat was withdrawn in areas where it could be shown that supplies could be made up by hunting or fishing.⁹ During the depression years the regulation meant that practically no meat was distributed at all: reserve children were entitled to 4 lbs of flour a week as basic nourishment.¹⁰ There

⁴ New South Wales Council of Churches to Lyons, 6 June 1934 (AA A1/34/8281).

⁵ Commissioner, Salvation Army in New South Wales to Lyons, 5 June 1934 (AA A1/34/8281).

⁶ City Mens Bible Class to Lyons, 7 August 1934 (AA A1/34/8281).

⁷ Report of the Annual General Meeting, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 16 June 1933.

⁸ Circular No. 224 (31 March 1916), Copies of Letters Sent, Aborigines Protection Board, State Archives of New South Wales (NSWSA).

⁹ Circular 262 (23 March 1916), 591 (6 April 1916), 613 (20 April 1916), Aborigines Protection Board, NSWSA.

¹⁰ In 1930 the government conceded that this ration was insufficient for a healthy child but claimed it could be supplemented by the parents' earnings (NSW Parliamentary Debates, Legislative Assembly [LA], 2/124:316, 742).

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were dozens of other regulations which managers were to enforce on pain of dismissal, which ranged from the weekly inspection of houses to the necessity of seeking permission to enter or leave a reserve.¹¹ Buildings, many of which were already decrepit before the depression, underwent no improvement after 1930, despite the fact that reserve populations in the early 1930s doubled or trebled.¹² Nor were Aborigines who lived away from the reserves spared indignity. Such people were obliged, for instance, to have the permission of a policeman before they could visit a doctor.¹³

Aborigines also suffered considerable discrimination through federal and state statutes. Although after 1927 Aborigines were eligible to receive the New South Wales Family Endowment, after 1930 it was distributed to almost everyone in rations, furniture, household or even station improvements. Scarcely any of the endowment, therefore, was transferable if a family left or was expelled from a reserve.¹⁴ Mothers, either Aboriginal or married to an Aboriginal, were excluded from the Maternity Allowance. Since Aborigines receiving benefits from the Board before the depression were ineligible for the dole the reserve populations swelled enormously, as did the fringe-camps on the edges of country towns.¹⁵ Faced with continuing pressure from local councils, in 1936 the Board passed an amendment to the Act which entitled authorities to remove any person classified as Aboriginal from insanitary or undesirable conditions to a designated reserve. The onus of proof of non-Aboriginality lay on the accused.¹⁶ Since by definition any fringe-camp could be considered undesirable, it followed that the town authorities had acquired the power to arrest a person on suspicion of being Aboriginal and forcibly remove him or her from a town. Yet even this extraordinarily repressive amendment, passed less than 18 months after the occasion of the Northern Territory protests, provoked very little comment.

Nor did there appear to be very much awareness that the thrust of this legislation and the general population movement towards the reserves in the early 1930s ran counter to the general policy pursued by the administration since about 1900. Codified in the Act of 1909, the policy looked to the day when there would be no reserves, no Board, no expense and no people claiming Aboriginal descent. In time the 'Aboriginal problem' would be solved forever.¹⁷ The nub of the perceived problem was the association of Aborigines with each other; the perceived remedy was the

¹¹ Regulations Under the *Aborigines Protection Act*, gazetted 30 June 1910. These regulations remained in force until 1940.

¹² Aborigines Protection Board, *Annual Report*, 1929-1930:1.

¹³ *Select Committee on administration of the Aborigines Protection Board*, Proceedings of the Committee, Minutes of evidence and exhibits, NSW LA, 13 July 1938 (witness A.C. Pettitt):48.

¹⁴ *Family Endowment Act*, 1929(39), s.3; see also Aborigines Protection Board, *Annual Report*, 1927-8:1; 1929-1930:1.

¹⁵ Commonwealth *Maternity Allowance Act*, 1912(8), s.6(2); also, the *Invalid and Old Age Pensioners Act*, 1923(1), s.16(1)(c) excluded Aborigines from the old age pension; for details of the decision excluding most Aborigines from the dole see Aborigines Protection Board, *Annual Report* 1931-2:1.

¹⁶ Amendment No. 32 of 1936, No. 2(c); 3(d).

¹⁷ Aborigines Protection Board, *Annual Report*, 1920-21:5.

elimination of the reserves. Aborigines were to be dispersed throughout the white community.¹⁸ By 1918 the Board had been granted the power to remove from its reserves all children under eighteen years, men who in official opinion ought to be earning a living elsewhere and all people of more than 'half' European descent.¹⁹

Several techniques to reduce the reserve populations were evolved after 1909. Amongst the most commonly used were the expulsion orders, by which men and women, unemployed or 'non-Aborigines' were prohibited from remaining on or entering one or more reserves. Over a decade more than a thousand people were so proscribed: one notification of 1915 contained the names of eighty-eight people.²⁰ Another technique was the revocation of thinly populated reserves by refusing entrance to all prospective residents, so that through natural wastage it was within a few years possible for the Board to revoke them as 'uninhabited'.²¹ The closure of the more populous reserves was more complicated. Natural wastage had to be supplemented by expulsions and threats; often the more obstinate residents had to be forcibly removed from their homes.²²

The other arm of the policy of dispersal (for such it was, rather than its official name of Protection) was the removal of children. Under an amendment of 1915,²³ any child of less than eighteen years, whether living on a reserve or not, could be removed from its parents and placed in a home if such a course was considered to be in the moral or physical welfare of the child. No committal hearing was necessary. Even by 1915, hundreds of children had been separated from family and community; after 1915 the program expanded so that a further 1,400 had been removed by 1934.²⁴

¹⁸ *Aborigines Protection Act*, 1909(25), s.3. Also (s.8[1], [2]) non-Aborigines were prohibited from associating with Aborigines.

¹⁹ Amendment No. 7 of 1918, No. 2(i)(a). For decades the Board clung to the nonsensical fantasy of a three-generational black-to-white genetic progression. The term 'half-caste', besides being offensive to self-identifying Aborigines was meaningless since it implied that a person so designated had one Aboriginal parent and one white. In fact it is probable in 1910 that the majority of Aborigines had two self-identifying Aboriginal parents. Most local officials realised that such definitions were bureaucratic nonsense and categorised people simply (though just as inaccurately) on the basis of skin colour.

²⁰ Circular No. 51, 7 January 1915, Copies of Letters Sent, NSWSA.

²¹ An example of this process was the revocation of Grong Grong reserve, near Narrandera, in about 1900. It was declared in 1884 largely in answer to local white protesters who wanted to shift the Aborigines from Narrandera; then the Board changed its mind and refused almost all applications for residence, so that the reserve was deserted (or so it was claimed) by 1900 and revoked.

²² An example of this process was the closure of Warangesda reserve on the Murrumbidgee. Between 1909 and 1923 a fierce battle was waged between the Warangesda residents and the administration, at the end of which hundreds of people had been expelled for a variety of reasons. Local history relates that the last resident defended his home with a shotgun until the roof was pulled off.

²³ Amendment No. 2 of 1915, 2(i)(a); 4.

²⁴ The Ward Register in the State Archives contains the names and case histories of 800 children removed to 1928. Another listing names a further 600 children removed to about 1934.

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Though the depression put a temporary brake on the dispersal policy, its effects in the two decades 1909-1929 were staggering. There was hardly an Aboriginal family in the state, certainly not one living in close proximity to the whites, which had not been touched. Town councils, encouraged by what seemed to be a temporary truce with the Board, redoubled their efforts in the 1920s to rid their town of a fringe-camp or official reserve. In Wiradjuri country in the central-west, some thirty towns listed as having an Aboriginal population in 1883 no longer had one by 1930. Of hundreds of reserves in the state in 1900, there were only 71 in 1939.²⁵ Of the children removed, at least a third never returned and were not heard of again. Mental hospitals, prisons, alcoholism and suicide awaited many of those taken so young that they did not know where to return, or so frightened by anti-Aboriginal propaganda in the Homes that they dared not.²⁶ Worse, the Amendment of 1918 defined an Aborigine as 'any full-blooded or half-caste aboriginal who is a native of New South Wales':²⁷ only such people were legally allowed to enter a reserve. To the whites of the country towns this definition was as meaningless as it was to the Aborigines themselves, whose criteria were self-identification and being of Aboriginal descent. The discrepancy between the official and the *de facto* definitions caused untold misery in the 1920s and 1930s. The hundreds of people whom the Board expelled from its reserves on the grounds that they were not Aborigines were in many cases immediately hounded from their new camps by the local councils on the grounds that they were. By the beginning of the depression many of the displaced people had spent a decade wandering from station to reserve to fringe-camp.

Perhaps it is not surprising that those who protested over events in the north in the 1930s were for the most part silent over the mundane brutality of those years. Most of them lived in the cities: they simply were not aware of the dusk-to-dawn curfews, the pursuits by alsatian dogs, the prisoners dragged through the streets handcuffed to mounted policemen, the children living on nothing but flour and tea, the windowless leaking huts, their beds sodden throughout the winter, the appalling infant mortality rate, the bulldozed houses. What is surprising in the light of the protests from so many diverse groups in the community about events in the Northern Territory is the silence which greeted the policy which allowed or encouraged such outrages. For while the mental and physical violence of dispersal was kept hidden, the ethical violence was perfectly plain. There were constant references in the Board's Annual Reports to the 'lazy' or 'irresponsible' who should be made to work in the white community. At least to 1925, the removal of children was justified on the grounds that they would constitute by remaining on the reserves 'a positive menace to the State'.²⁸ The closure

²⁵ Up to 1915 the Annual Reports listed the number of Aborigines living in hundreds of towns in the state. Some of the Wiradjuri towns which lost their Aboriginal populations in this period were Junee, Wyalong and Wee Jasper. One of the most dramatic declines occurred at Forbes, whose population fell from 75 to 1 between 1908 and 1915; cf. Aborigines Protection Board, *Annual Report*, 1938-1939:2-3.

²⁶ Of 83 Wiradjuri children removed between 1916 and 1928, one third did not return to their communities. According to the case summaries, of the 83 children 10 fell pregnant while wards, 10 spent periods in mental hospitals and seven died.

²⁷ Amendment No. 7 of 1918, No. 2(1)(a).

²⁸ Aborigines Protection Board, *Annual Report*, 1911:2.

of reserves or the installation of a manager was openly attributed to pressure from the local whites.²⁹ Yet apart from an article in the *Sydney Morning Herald* in 1926 which queried the justice of preventing Aboriginal wards from marrying Aborigines, there was little protest over the *purpose* of the policy.³⁰ There seems hardly to have been an awareness that the official policy was dispersal, or that dispersal implied the extinction of Aboriginality, or that the extinction of Aboriginality meant nothing less than the extinction of Aborigines. There seemed to be little understanding that in the pursuit of dispersal the state regularly and on a massive scale violated the most basic human rights: to live at a place of one's choosing, in a manner of one's choosing and with the company of one's choosing; and to raise one's children in accordance with a chosen cultural inheritance.

Official reasoning ran that Aborigines were doomed to extinction anyway and that Aboriginal culture in southern Australia was practically non-existent.³¹ A moment's objective thought could have detected the disjuncture between rationale and reality. After 1909 it was perfectly obvious that the self-identifying Aboriginal population was increasing rapidly: had that not been so, dispersal would not have been necessary. While academic debate took place in the 1930s as to whether it was genetically possible to assimilate Aborigines without detriment to the whites, the New South Wales administration, like those in other states, had been proceeding for decades on the basis that it was not only possible but desirable.³² The very fact that Aboriginal children were removed to be raised as whites gave the lie to the official dictum that Aboriginality was a matter of genes rather than culture. Clearly it was the socialisation of the children as Aborigines which the officials feared most. At the root of dispersal lay the fear of Aboriginal community from which Europeans were to be kept excluded.

This exposition of official policy throws the assimilation policy of the post Second World War years into a rather more sinister light than the well-meaning muddle by which it is sometimes portrayed. For the context of assimilation at the time of its adoption by the New South Wales government in 1940 was that, hitherto, dispersal had failed and failed catastrophically. Practice had demonstrated what a moment's thought should have foretold: that people could not be indefinitely expelled from reserves and camps because there was nowhere for them to go except to another reserve or fringe-camp, the nearest town council to which would then begin to abuse the Board. While almost everyone had been shifted from one place to another between

²⁹ For example, at Cowra, *Annual Report*, 1924:1.

³⁰ 'Aborigines race dying out. Fate of girls few chances for marriage'; *Sydney Morning Herald*, 29 October 1924. I do not mean to suggest of course that there was no protest about conditions in New South Wales. Two redoubtable campaigners who deserve recognition today were the parliamentarian Mark Davidson and Mrs Joan Kingsley-Strack. I am grateful to Jack Horner for showing me the information he holds on Mrs Strack.

³¹ To the criticism of the *Herald* article, a Board spokesman replied that 'the extinction of the race was inevitable'. For a discussion of Elkin and others' estimation of southern Aboriginal culture at this time see P. Read, 'A double-headed coin: protection and assimilation in Yass 1900-1960', in Gammage and Markus 1982:9-28.

³² See A. Markus, 'After the outward appearance: scientists, administrators and politicians', in Gammage and Markus 1982:83-106.

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1909 and 1939, and the number of areas where Aborigines were living was smaller, Aboriginal community was almost as strong and defiant as ever.³³

In September 1940 Board Secretary Pettitt laid the foundations of policy for the next twenty years. He began by explaining to the Board that the system which had been operating for many years had institutionalised Aborigines. Supplies had been made available to them 'without any exertion on their part'. They were not being called upon to shift for themselves. He presented a seven-point program: to inculcate the habit of self-help, to keep Aborigines occupied, to deal with youth, to apprentice outstanding talent, to select suitable families for removal from stations into the white community, to find employment for people away from the reserves, and to encourage local white people to become interested in Aboriginal matters.³⁴ There was nothing particularly new about the program except the plan to move families into towns. The consequence of that helpful-sounding proposal however was far-reaching, for the town-housing scheme in the next twenty years became the principal pillar of assimilation. The 'carrot' of a town house would reinforce the 'stick' of reserve and camp clearance. In effect, the re-housing scheme provided the means to solve the hitherto intractable problem of where to put people expelled from the reserves.

This is not the place to discuss why Pettitt's plan failed so dismally (by 1961 only thirty-nine new houses had been built in towns). The essential point is that assimilation was not a policy in itself, but a refinement of the continuing and much older policy of dispersal. The other 'carrot' of assimilation of the post-war years can be seen in the same light as the housing scheme. This was the Exemption Certificate system, by which on application adults were entitled to a few social service benefits such as the old age pension, provided the claimant did not live on a reserve. Certificate holders were also entitled to purchase and consume alcohol. The Exemption Certificate system in practice acted to condemn 'non-existent' Aboriginal values as much as to affirm the European. Certificates were granted to those who acted 'respectably', saved their money, did not abuse managers or left a reserve to live in a town. They were withheld from those who had 'too many' relatives to stay, shared their cheques with kin-folk or allowed their children to be raised by the extended family.³⁵

The Board's records indicate that whatever the official rhetoric the intention of the state was as firm as ever. In the period 1945-1969 as many reserves and camps vanished as before: in Wiradjuri country Leeton, Darlington Point, Griffith, Gooloogong, Yass and Condobolin all lost at least one Aboriginal living area, while very strong pressure was put upon the people at the Brungle and Cowra reserves to quit. As many children were removed from their communities: nineteen children were removed from Cowra, which was regarded as one of the Board's trouble spots, but at

³³ To what extent Aborigines wanted to follow the suggestion of such Aboriginal leaders of the 1930s as Ferguson and Patten of voluntary assimilation with the whites is not clear. This important subject still awaits an in-depth study.

³⁴ Aborigines Welfare Board, Minutes of Meetings, 3 September 1940, NSWSA. The assimilation of Aborigines was formally added to the Board's objectives through the Amendment to the Act 1940(12), 3(b)(1).

³⁵ Hundreds of applications for Exemption are held in the Board's General Correspondence Files, 1949-1969. By the time the scheme fell into disuse in 1963, 1,400 Exemptions had been granted.

Narrandera, which had a large but peaceful Aboriginal population, removals were nil.³⁶ But the old problems of the Board remained. Aboriginal resistance was too strong, too few people wanted to join the larger community, too many children returned home. By 1969 the remaining reserves were fewer in number, but some were more populous and their inhabitants more militant.

The implications of this analysis run in two directions. The first concerns why there was very much more protest about events and policies in the north than there were in the south. It seems that in New South Wales the dispersal policy was allowed to proceed because the public had fallen victim to that most dangerous of administrative myths, that the repression of a minority was for its own ultimate good, and that that good coincided with the greater good of the public weal. Even the many white-sponsored Aboriginal advancement groups of the 1950s fought their first battles for the right of Aborigines to live in towns, not to remain on reserves. For every ill-disposed, cruel, violent or pathologically disturbed official there were as many well-intentioned and conscientious individuals who did their best to persuade Aborigines to become white. They too contributed to the consignment of Aboriginality to oblivion. Truly the path to hell is paved with good intentions.

Dispersal is around us and within us. The same Joint Parliamentary Committee which recommended in 1967 that the Aborigines Welfare Board be abolished, recommended that no new houses be built on reserves. Instead Aborigines should be scattered about in towns 'and not concentrated in any one street or town'.³⁷ In the 1970s the Board's housing function was absorbed by the Housing Commission. Similar policies to those of the 1950s seem to have prevailed. An internal report by the Department of Aboriginal Affairs concluded in 1979 that, for instance, at the Cowra reserve there was strong pressure on the residents to live in town. Newcomers were not allowed to move into vacant houses; several buildings, including the single-men's quarters, were demolished.³⁸ In 1970 a new state-wide housing scheme was begun whose ostensible purpose was to remove Aborigines from areas of depressed employment. It was, and is, known as the Family Resettlement Scheme. It could hardly have been a coincidence that the first towns from which families were removed were Wilcannia and Bourke, two notorious 'problem' towns, or that the cities to which they were removed were cities of low Aboriginal population — Newcastle, Wagga and Albury. By 1980, 790 people had been moved under the scheme, enough to people half a dozen reserves. The fact that the scheme was voluntary was offset by the run-down condition of the Aboriginal quarters in the original towns, as well as the uncertain employment opportunities in the new towns.³⁹ The proportion of Aboriginal children separated from their community or family in the last decade has remained extremely high. In 1980, 14 per cent of children in state institutions were Aboriginal, while Aborigines themselves made up less than 2.5 per cent of the state's

³⁶ Calculations based on oral history and records in the General Correspondence. There was not an official reserve at Narrandera.

³⁷ *Report from the joint committee of the Legislative Council and the Legislative Assembly upon Aborigines welfare* (N.S.W.), I, Report and Minutes of the Proceedings, 13 September 1967:12.

³⁸ Department of Aboriginal Affairs 1979:pp. A3, A4.

³⁹ Parliament of New South Wales 1981:I, 66-68.

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population.⁴⁰ An Aboriginal child-care agency was in 1980 refused permission to enter a major reformatory on the grounds that there were no Aboriginal children in residence. Subsequent research showed there to be some thirty children of Aboriginal descent in residence, some of whom, because of the failure of the institution to communicate with the parents, did not know they were Aboriginal. Others of the children, though dark-skinned themselves, were too frightened to speak to the Aboriginal field-worker.⁴¹ Clearly, the fear of Aboriginal community haunts the Europeans still. Whether today's dispersal results from state policy or the implacable momentum of the past is for present purposes irrelevant. So the question of public protest in the 1930s is also one of the 1980s. Aurakun and Noonkanbah have replaced Coniston and Caledon Bay. Dispersal proceeds apace.

The other conclusion concerns not continuity but perspective. Even in the memorable television series *Women of the sun* (1983) it was not as apparent as it might have been that the actions of a violent manager were not just an unfortunate accident of employment, that the run-down condition of a reserve was not just the result of government parsimony, that a camp was destroyed not just through the greed of a speculator. So in real life it was not an accident that those thirty Wiradjuri towns lost their Aboriginal populations, or that the Wiradjuri can claim, under the New South Wales Land Rights Act, only some ten hectares of reserve land out of a former total of some 1,400. It is only through an understanding of the dispersal policy that the course of Aboriginal history in New South Wales can appear as something other than inevitable.

So too it is apparent that we cannot attempt to explain changes in Aboriginal social life, living patterns, culture or language unless the generalised context of dispersal is allowed. Besides the large number of people whose houses were razed, a much larger number shifted in anticipation, sheltered relatives or, in an attempt to save their own homes and hearth, cut themselves off from contact with other Aborigines. It was not just the children actually separated from their families who were affected, but the communities lacking the leadership of young adults, the extended families who could not forgive, the parents forced from their reserve dwellings rather than yield their children to the dormitory.⁴² Whether state policy caused anger or fear, defiance or misery, dispersal touched all New South Wales Aborigines, and touched them profoundly:

They have been forced to forgo much of their self-respect. All this 'metho' drinking is a manifestation of a cause: the alienation of the people from the land, the alienation of the people from their own culture, people denied any right to decide their own future, denied the basic powers every white man takes for granted in this country. This is the right to bring your kids up in the way you want to bring them up . . . For the last fifty years this has really screwed up just about every black person in this country. It is going to take another ten to twenty years to overcome

⁴⁰ Mongta 1982:II, 1.

⁴¹ Personal communication, Aileen Mongta, April 1982.

⁴² Failure to send children to the dormitory was one of the principal reasons for the expulsion of parents from Warangesda; see note 22 above.

the effects of this because the effects are so deeply ingrained in the kids, this kind of inferiority attitude that before you do anything you must ask the white man for it, you must ask permission.⁴³

Until government departments learn to listen to Aborigines, a major responsibility of historians is to inform the policy makers of the perspective of the past. For instance, in 1980 an inter-departmental Commonwealth government team visited Brungle Reserve, near Tumut. Its report remarked upon the paucity of the written records and the 'progressive diminution' of the inhabitants. From the fact that only one family in ten had moved back from Tumut to the reserve it was reasoned that no-one wanted to live there, and that no new houses would be built. The Board's records show that every technique outlined in this paper was enacted at Brungle to make the residents shift, including the refusal to carry out the most basic repairs. If the team had taken the trouble to talk to the former residents it would have learned the reality of the dispossession. It would also have learned that some fifteen Tumut families would move back to Brungle if only accommodation were available.⁴⁴

I do not offer this discussion as an exercise in breast-beating but in the hope that in the next decade the context of systematic dispersal will become better known and understood. Such terms as 'invasion' and 'attempted genocide', which still appear to stick in the typewriters of some historians and others, will no longer be avoided. I hope that an understanding of the policy and its consequences will provide a perspective on the changes of the last eighty years, and for Australians of European descent, lead to an awareness of why Aborigines want to be left alone.

⁴³ Paul Coe, address to trainee teachers, in Tatz and McConnochie 1975:104.

⁴⁴ Commonwealth Department of Aboriginal Affairs et.al., 1980:13-14; personal communication, Coral Bolger, September 1982.

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