Charles Dunford Rowley

CHARLES ROWLEY – A FIGHTER FOR JUSTICE AND EQUALITY

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Charles Rowley's death in September 1985 left all who had known him and worked with him with a deep sense of loss. Not only were social scientists, both researchers and students, deprived of the opportunity to discuss their work with Charles, knowing that they would receive wise advice and support, but also all concerned with the cause of justice for the disadvantaged were aware that one of the main protagonists had gone. But although the loss is great, Charles has left social science with an invaluable legacy: a lifetime of work which has laid the foundations for changes in policies and attitudes affecting the future of Aborigines in Australia, Papua New Guineans and other indigenous minorities and peoples of the Third World. This provides a sound basis for continuing endeavours in these fields.

Charles Dunford Rowley, born in 1906 at Dunedoo, was the eldest son of a mounted policeman who worked for many years in country towns in central New South Wales. Through scholarships he was able to attend high school and, later, the University of Sydney, and eventually to qualify as a secondary school teacher, a profession which he followed for the next ten years. In 1942 he joined the AIF and for four years served with the military Directorate of Research, largely in Papua and New Guinea. That experience left him with a strong interest in and sympathy for the future of Papua New Guineans, particularly in terms of their progress to independence from colonial rule and their achievement of a way of life compatible with their own desires. In 1951 Charles Rowley was appointed Director of the Australian School of Pacific Administration (ASOPA), an institution established to provide young government officers with the education and experience appropriate to the successful implementation of Australian policies in Papua New Guinea. For the next fifteen years he and his colleagues were responsible for the training of these 'kiaps' and their solicitude for the future administration of Papua New Guinea made a clear impact on many of their students. Charles's first book, *The Australians in German New Guinea, 1914-1921* (1958), clearly demonstrates his concern over the impact of Australian policy in Papua New Guinea. His humanitarian and broadly based understanding and ideals were clearly presented in his next book *The New Guinea Villager* (1964), a thoughtful and evocative study which has provided inspiration and insight for many subsequent researchers and administrators.

In 1964 Charles Rowley was appointed director of a research project, Aborigines in Australian Society, sponsored by the Social Science Research Council (SSRC), now the Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia. The results of this project, more than any other, heightened awareness of the inequities faced by Aborigines in all spheres of Australian life, and provided essential background for the formulation of new policies to promote self-management and self-determination. Charles Rowley's contribution to the project was enormous. His trilogy – *The Destruction of Aboriginal Society* (1970), *Outcasts in White Australia* (1971), *The Remote Aborigines* (1971) – chronicled the long history of dispossession and exploitation and documented the contemporary problems and frustrations faced by

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Aboriginal people with a clarity that has made them required reading for all subsequent students. And in addition, through his encouragement, other younger researchers such as Jeremy Long, Fay Gale, Frank Jones and Frank Stevens were able to make contributions which extended the scope of the project.

In 1968 Charles Rowley returned to Port Moresby as foundation Professor of Politics in the newly established University of Papua New Guinea. During the next six years he taught many of the young intellectuals destined to hold positions of responsibility in politics and government during the country's critical early years of independence. His perceptive approach to the questions and pressures confronting these students helped them to form their ideas and make assessments in a reasoning and thoughtful way. Although Charles Rowley's period at the University of Papua New Guinea took him to the conventional age of retirement, his return to Australia in 1974 did not mark his departure from the public arena of Aboriginal affairs. On the contrary, while carrying out the position of Executive Director of the Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia, he also became Chairman of the Aboriginal Land Fund Commission, was a member of the Aboriginal Treaty Committee and, during the last five years, organised a study of the contemporary social and economic situation of Aboriginal families in rural New South Wales and metropolitan Sydney. Books published during these later years include *A Matter of Justice* (1978), a clear expression of his frustration at the failures of government to carry out policies which, in theory, aimed to achieve equality for Aborigines.

Charles Rowley, through his own work and publications, made an outstanding personal contribution to the growth and development of social science in Australia. He also, through his willingness to listen, his sympathy, his patience and his wisdom, contributed to the work of many other, more recent, scholars in that field. As a newcomer to Aboriginal studies in 1977 I soon became aware that Charles would not only provide me with a wealth of advice and references to otherwise obscure work, but that he would listen, even to naive and poorly formed thoughts, and would criticise without destructiveness. From the beginning he took a personal interest in my research, a study of the Aboriginal economy carried out under the direction of Dr E.K. Fisk at the Development Studies Centre, A.N.U., because, as he had himself stated in a paper on research for the Council of Aboriginal Affairs (1971), 'the greatest single lack of the SSRC project was an overall economic assessment of [the Aboriginal] situation and possibilities'. Although those of us involved in the Aboriginal Economy project were well aware that our study could not fill that gap adequately, we were greatly encouraged by Charles's support and felt sufficiently confident to develop the study as far as seemed feasible within limitations imposed by time, finance and the availability of information. In particular, Charles's understanding of the need to assess economic performance as part of Aboriginal society and culture, rather than as an independent element, did much to alleviate my fears that, as a human geographer, I was delving into fields in which my skills were inappropriate and inadequate.

As I extended my own research experience in socio-economic issues in remote Aboriginal communities I became increasingly aware of the enlightenment of Charles's early ideas on Aboriginal development. During Canberra sojourns between periods of fieldwork in northern Australia I found my discussions with Charles both enjoyable and valuable. In the process of exchanging stories of events in isolated places known to both of us, I learnt much from his inquiries and comments about changes affecting pastoral stations which had passed to Aboriginal control. These communities, of particular interest to Charles because many had

been purchased while he was Chairman of the Aboriginal Land Fund Commission, were, for both of us, of prime importance because they offered people some opportunity for economic independence, to set alongside political and social control. Charles subscribed firmly to the view that, although the commercial success of these enterprises would obviously contribute to the economic well-being of those concerned, the acquisition of these properties was primarily important from a social point of view. It provided groups of people who had been displaced from their land, and who had, as workers in the pastoral industry, been exploited for many years in furthering the interests of capitalists, with control over the land and its resources, and gave them the opportunity to set priorities for their own futures and those of their children. There is no doubt that Charles, after the Aboriginal Land Fund Commission became part of the Aboriginal Development Commission in 1980, became more and more disillusioned as he witnessed the discarding of these socially aware policies in favour of 'economic viability' and 'commercial profit'. His comments on these issues in the 1980s showed a growing sense of frustration, as the rules and regulations governing the allocation of funds to support Aboriginal enterprises became more restrictive, and the chances for all but a very few Aboriginal businessmen to benefit became almost non-existent.

Charles did not retire with the winding up of the Aboriginal Land Fund Commission. On the contrary, he redirected his energies into a project in which he had been interested for many years: a follow-up study of New South Wales Aboriginal families interviewed in the course of the SSRC project of the 1960s. This study was designed to examine whether the social and economic situation had, at the family level, improved during the intervening period, a measure of the achievement of equality and the allocation of justice. The study was also, in accord with ideals often put forward by Charles, to be truly Aboriginal, conducted by Aboriginal fieldworkers working with families who knew them, and posing questions which, in Aboriginal eyes, were relevant. Charles spent many days discussing these issues with his Aboriginal co-workers, and ensuring that the project was fully understood and supported by members of the Aboriginal community. This approach has been advocated by many social science researchers but, unfortunately, carried out by few. Charles's determination that the approach should succeed emphasises his aim that research into such issues must cease to regard Aborigines as subjects but must be carried out with their full collaboration and co-operation. It undoubtedly earned him well-deserved respect from many Aboriginal people.

This final study produced, as might be expected, conflicting results. While physical aspects of people's lives — their shelter, their access to essential services — had improved, other aspects demonstrated a marked lack of progress. In particular, levels of employment and, in real terms, wealth had if anything declined. As the title of the first monograph from this study *Equality by Instalments* (1982) suggests, both the momentum and direction of change were less than satisfactory, an indication that the ideals of social and economic justice were far from being attained. The second part of this project, which extended interviews from rural-dwelling families living in metropolitan Sydney, was conducted in 1984 and Charles was working on the analysis at the time of his death. It will be completed posthumously.

Anyone who knew and worked with Charles Rowley held him in the highest regard: as a scholar of great integrity, whose ideas did so much to promote the cause of justice for the socially and economically deprived; as a friend who was always willing to listen and discuss and who, through his own modest and unassuming approach, gave people the confidence to make greater efforts in their fields of study; and as a fighter for recognition of the value of

customs and beliefs governing the lives of people in non-European societies. We have learned a great deal from Charles Rowley. It is to be hoped that we continue to put that knowledge into practice.

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