THE NOONKANBAH STORY — Two Reviews

Stan Davey and Rod Dixon

The Noonkanbah story. By Erich Kolig. University of Otago Press, New Zealand 1987. Pp. 159. Endnotes. \$NZ24.75.

There were headlines in August 1980 about the confrontation between the AMAX Corporation, planning to drill for oil on Noonkanbah Station on the southern border of the Kimberley region of Western Australia, and the Yungngora Aborigines who had recently acquired the lease. It was seen then as a dramatic development in the conflict between miners and Aborigines, but memories are so short that Erich Kolig's book reminds us of the events themselves, the previous history of the region and the later happenings.

We are fortunate to have two separate reviewers who, like the book's author, had intimate knowledge of the 1980 situation and a lasting involvement with the Aboriginal people concerned. They saw the events from different view points. The first review is by Stan Davey and the second is by Rod Dixon.

Review by Stan Davey, Community Development Consultant, Darwin.

Kolig's book presents useful insights into Aboriginal conceptions and philosophy establishing the importance of Noonkanbah Station to the Yungngora and Kadjina people of the Fitzroy River Valley. The religious foundations outlined by Kolig provided the people with inspiration and determination in their conflict with government bureaucracy and the mining companies. Kolig effectively captures the inherited world perspective which formed 'the Aboriginal point of view in the matter' and presents 'some of the shapes and events of the past and present (which) assume a distinctive form when seen through the Aboriginal prism' (p.9).

Between 1900 and 1930 desert Aborigines from the southern Kimberley moved to the Fitzroy River Valley to join the Nygina, Gunian and Bunapa speakers indigenous to the area. The newcomers 'through the infusion of the vitality of belief and lore' revived traditional culture in the region 'and shaped the station into a religious centre and its Aboriginal community into a mainstay of traditional culture in the area' (p.19).

The hostile and degrading conditions which the people residing at Noonkanbah confronted daily during their involvement with the pastoral industry are presented. These provide evidence for Kolig's conviction that the 'two major ingredients' in the struggle were the 'enormously strong attachment to land' and 'the fear and loathing that this community had for Europeans' (p.9). Additional reasons for the latter are well documented in the chapters on 'Pacification, martyrs & guerillas' and 'The work force'. In August 1971 the Noonkanbah community packed up and left the station.

The chapter 'Diaspora' highlights the agony of the community in exile at Fitzroy Crossing following their 'walk off'. Here the difficulties of the pastoral regime were replaced by confrontations with bureaucrats and missionaries engaged in the Aboriginal industry. In his analysis of this period Kolig is unable to find anything but an 'awkward amalgam of warped

attitudes form(ing) the official front with which Aborigines had to deal' (p.57). This suggests an absence of understanding by Kolig outside a narrow anthropological perspective. The brief given to officers from the Department of Community Welfare (DCW) was to work with communities, respect their traditional values and assist in enabling them to achieve their own goals. As Kolig points out additional anthropological knowledge may have helped these officers to have comprehended the relationship differences which brought about the separation of the people into two incorporated bodies, Kadjina and Yungngora. It may also have helped to minimise some of the tensions which subsequently arose.

In my experience the DCW officers concerned followed their brief closely, listening to the aspirations of the communities and supporting the plans they enunciated. For instance the communities rejected the Housing Commission style of housing. The Kadjina and the Bayulu (from the neighbouring Go Go Station) were then assisted to purchase their own brickmaking machine and erect their own stores. The Kadjina were also supported to obtain a mustering plant. Faced with refusal by station managers to contract them, it was the support of the DCW and its officers which finally won them a contract. And there was much more. The story of the Noonkanbah people's struggle would not be weakened by allowing anthropological observations to comprehend the whole context in which the Kadjina and Yungngora operated including the fact that some bureaucrats shared in the drama alongside the people.

It is possible that public support for the communities would have been stronger if the underpinning philosophy of the people presented in the chapter entitled 'The sanctity of the land' had been spelt out at the time. Aboriginal understanding of the spiritual content of their land still needs to be made significant to the dominant Australian society. (For example some bureaucrats, politicians, mining and pastoral interests still use, to effect, the claim that sacred sites are fabricated capriciously.) Kolig's exposé could well contribute to an increased public awareness, although it is unlikely that the pristine picture he presents was unaltered even at the time of the Noonkanbah struggle.

In the section 'Reclaiming the land' there seems to be some misjudgement in his assessment of the dynamics at play within the communities following their voluntary exile. The branding of the younger leaders of the breakaway Kadjina group as a 'fun loving', 'bunch of lively young people', as if they made their decisions from that stance, ignores the fact that decisions made were concluded only after consultation with the elders of their group who permitted them the role of spokespersons. The role of Friday Muller, in spite of his greatness, is overstated and ignores that of his first lieutenant Ginger Ngungawilla who in some respects appears to have had equal if not greater authority. It was he who stood up to the Noonkanbah Station manager and delivered the message that the people would no longer work for him. It was Ngungawilla who went with a group to Strelley to examine their education system and came back to establish the Noonkanbah independent school. He assumed no special privileges from his leadership position and remained with the community throughout. Similarly the role of the women does not rate a mention by Kolig. When the community moved to Noonkanbah it was the women who maintained the school camp on the edge of Fitzroy Crossing and by their frugality saved, through the Isolated Children's Assistance Scheme, sufficient money to commence the independent school. Their operation of services such as the community store was an essential element in the struggle.

1979: Noonkanbah men block an entrance to the station against AMAX and the Western Australian Mines Department. Photo: Kimberley Land Council Newsletter.

In the last three chapters Kolig provides a broad outline of events up to and including the government invasion of the P Hill sacred site in August 1980.

The legal challenge by the Noonkanbah people to mining applications before the Broome Mining Warden's Court and the impotency of the Aboriginal leaders in these circumstances are discussed. This is followed by a lengthy dissertation on why Aborigines are not really conservationists and why they chose to oppose mining more than pastoral activities. The latter topic needs deeper consideration than that provided by Kolig. For example to argue that 'pastoralism fitted quite well with the image of traditional food procuring methods; . . . Thus traditional ways of thinking did not hinder greatly the acceptance of pastoralism' (p.126), ignores the ready involvement of other Aborigines in the mining industry at the turn of the century. Rowley¹ notes that in Western Australia 'by the time of the 1905 (Aborigines) Act, some Aborigines were self employed in mining' and 'there had been periodic attempts by police to round up Aborigines from their mining and to take them back to the stations'. The Nyungamata who rushed up from the Pilbara to support the Noonkanbah stance in 1980 had survived mainly by mining since the early 1950s. When it came to a matter of survival 'traditional ways of thinking did not hinder greatly the acceptance of mining and its accommodation.

Finally Kolig's account fails to highlight the extreme political and physical pressure exerted by the Western Australian Government during the period 1978-1980, including the numerous ministerial visits to Noonkanbah with their attempts at persuasion, the use of ridicule and threats, the overriding of the authority of the Western Australian Museum, the conflict between the Commonwealth Minister for Aboriginal Affairs and the Western Australian Government and the extensive use of police force. These coercive pressures culminating in the notorious 'convoy' of police and miners, did not escape 'the Aboriginal point of view' and it would be worth examining Aboriginal perceptions in relation to these factors. Nor does Kolig show the importance of the Noonkanbah events in rallying Aboriginal leaders from the north (Arnhem Land) and from the south (the Pilbara) and presenting a show of Aboriginal solidarity not previously experienced.

Overall Kolig's treatise provides much useful and some essential background material but cannot claim to be THE Noonkanbah story.

Review by Rod Dixon, Darwin Institute of Technology.

This is a short book, but the most extensive account yet published of the controversy surrounding attempts by AMAX Corporation to drill for oil on Aboriginal sacred sites in the Kimberley district of Western Australia from 1977 to 1980. The sites were located on an Aboriginal owned pastoral lease — Noonkanbah Station — in the Fitzroy River Valley. The lease had only recently been granted to the Yungngora Aborigines and provided them with an opportunity to escape many of the pressures of life as fringe dwellers around the nearby town of Fitzroy Crossing.

The Western Australian Government has already put on record its version of these events — in a booklet entitled *Noonkanbah — the facts* — described by Professor R.M. Berndt as 'an appalling document . . . of truth and half truth'.² Kolig sets himself the task of 'capturing,

¹ Rowley 1971:252.

² Berndt 1980, quoted by Kolig on page 158 of the book under review.

as much as possible for an outsider, the Aboriginal point of view in the matter' (p.9).

The first section of the book, 'Losing the land', relates early European/Aboriginal contact in the Fitzroy Valley and the post-contact history of settlement by Western Desert Aborigines on Noonkanbah. Kolig's account tends to present Aborigines as the almost passive victims of awesome, externally-sourced determinations, understating their agency or autonomy from these determinations. This presentation is perplexing given an apparently contrary tendency in some of Kolig's previous writing.³ It is still more perplexing when one discovers that many of the Aborigines of whom he is writing were not people who were tied to the Fitzroy Valley, enduring European occupation of their lands because of spiritual links to 'country' but rather had *dislodged themselves voluntarily* from their desert habitat and moved en masse into areas [of the Fitzroy Valley] already occupied by whites' (p.82 emphasis added). Moreover they kept on coming even as, in some cases, their families were shot down around them (p.34), to become unpaid workers on European pastoral leases.

As pastoral workers, Kolig notes, they gave Europeans everything they possibly could, everything dear to them, their labour, their knowledge of the land, even ritual knowledge to a select few — all to people for whom, Kolig writes, they had feelings only of 'fear and loathing' (p.9), 'disgust' and 'deep rooted aversion' (p.49).

What intention underlay their coming and their staying? Kolig suggests an *ad hoc* collection of contributing factors — the harshness of the desert (p.31), more brutal circumstances elsewhere (p.18), the magnetic draw of European commodities (pp.31, 32) and a desire to escape the loneliness of being left behind in the desert (p.33). An analysis of Aboriginal oral history might have provided some further insights. But while Kolig admits oral tradition to his account when it relates to myth and religious beliefs, he is surprisingly dismissive of oral history, particularly when it varies from the European account. For example, 'Due to the lack of official records on this era, one can no more than state the oral traditions for what they are worth; interesting documents in themselves but to be taken *cum grano salis* as a reflection of the past' (p.23). For Kolig, discrepancies between the Aboriginal and European account of the same events are either to be accounted for as lacunae in the European account or deviousness in Aboriginal oral tradition.⁴

Such inconsistencies and contradictions may in fact be direct evidence of differently culturally ordered Aboriginal and European historiographies. As Sahlin reminds us, an event in one culture may not be an event in another: 'An event becomes such as it is interpreted. Only as it is appropriated in and through the cultural scheme does it acquire an historical significance'.⁵

Perhaps to understand the Aboriginal perspective on, *inter alia*, the Noonkanbah events, requires identifying such 'deviations' and reading backwards from them to the cultural scheme that generates them through *its* specific appropriation and ordering of contingent circumstances.

In his discussion of Aboriginal responses to change, Kolig outlines 'two pivotal and diametrically opposed viewpoints'. On the one side the viewpoint of Aboriginal society adjusting and adapting to European introduced change. On the other, the 'soap bubble theory' which

³ Kolig 1977 and 1981.

⁴ For a somewhat different perspective see Kolig 1980.

⁵ Sahlin 1954:xiv, original emphasis.

sees Aboriginal society poised in delicate spiritual and cultural balance which, when disturbed, will damage Aboriginal society beyond repair (pp.141-42). Kolig argues that these positions 'fall short of reflecting a sensible and authentic picture of the actual position' (p.142). Yet there is some evidence of at least the latter approach in a number of places in the book. I have already referred to a tendency, in the early chapters, to understate Aboriginal agency in the periods of initial contact. A related tendency in some parts of the book is to see Aboriginal culture not as seeking to reconsider, creatively, the changing world in its own terms but as collapsing under the disintegrative processes of westernisation — 'the creeping, yet fast advancing weaning process that led them farther and farther away from the remaining vestiges of what was pre-European in origin' (p.38). Where Aboriginal culture has maintained its essential forms, as at Noonkanbah, it appears to have done so only because it has been 'topped up' by uncontaminated culture carried into the region by desert migrants (p.39). While undoubtedly the original Aboriginal population of the Fitzroy Valley was close to extinction by the early twentieth century, had they maintained population numbers at pre-contact levels, Kolig's view appears to be that their culture would nevertheless have undergone 'agonising decline' and disintegration in the face of westernisation. But this is not Kolig's final position. On page 142, he writes:

Aboriginal tradition has never been so rigid as to totally resist new realities and reject innovations. A doctrinaire insistence on immutability notwithstanding, religion itself has most probably changed over the millenia and certainly in the most recent decades, without losing its traditional flavour.

while, looking to the future, he notes:

Aborigines, as they have always done in the past, will work out viable and intelligent solutions to what initially may appear to be insurmountable problems.

Doing so has always been their recipe for survival (p.142).

So why then a partial lapse into the 'soap bubble' or 'fatal impact' theory? One possibility is that Kolig is in fact residually attached to the idea that Aboriginal culture cannot persist under changed material conditions as anything other than a debased 'survival' of a pristine 'traditional culture'. He writes (p.143) of Aborigines coming to terms with European intrusions by 'gradually revising and reshaping their religious philosophy so as to make it amenable to modern practices'. For Kolig this means 'Aborigines will come more and more to maintain only small pockets of traditionalism in a world increasingly dominated by interests which Aborigines share with the wider society' (p.143). Is it not equally possible that Aborigines — interpreting, and interacting with the wider society from within their own worldview, may actively appropriate change, transforming the intrusions of European society in ways reproductive of the Aboriginal cultural system (notwithstanding internally wrought changes to it)? For example, in the case of the Argyle Diamond Mine (to which I presume Kolig refers on page 143 when he writes of Aborigines being forced to give up sacred sites under the allurements of large sums of money) it is possible to identify, (in addition to the obviously negative effects of the European development and compensation arrangements), a transformation of elements of the intrusion into opportunities for strengthening ties of relatedness within the Aboriginal society of the region, in terms of revitalised *winan* or exchange practices.⁶

⁶ Dixon, forthcoming.

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The Noonkanbah events provide Kolig with a contemporary opportunity for detailed research into Aboriginal responses to externally induced change. They particularly provide an opportunity to collect and analyse Aboriginal accounts of their involvement in the events, their interpretation of these events, the origins of these interpretations in an *a priori* cultural system and the internal changes to this system resulting from its exposure to conflict with a radically different cultural system. Unfortunately, lack of time and resources appear to have denied Kolig the possibility of carrying out such detailed research.

His book is, nevertheless, a welcome contribution to the growing literature on the interaction between Aborigines and resource developers.

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1976: Kadjina and Yungngora women with the truck brought by 'chuck in'. Their work was essential in the struggle. Photo: Jan Richardson.