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INTRODUCTION

> it is very hard for us to think of our dear old homes and white people living there and we've got to pass by like strangers . . .[1]

> We battle ourselfs we dont want to be chased about from place to place . . . The minister dont want us on the Mission station & from there he hunt us away . . . And when we are in Ceduna, they get the Policeman to hunt us away from here. We dont know where to go they chase us like wild dingoes . . .[2]

> Could you please come up here and see how we are kicked around. I am likely to be kicked off the [Copley] Common at any time. I am not the only aborigine receiving this treatment.[3]

These are pleas for help and sympathy from Aborigines forced off missions in South Australia by economic and political circumstances. Having left the communal and institutional life with which they grew up, they struggle in a hostile world. This book will consider the institutional experiences and their impact on Aboriginal people in southern Australia. It identifies strategies used by Aborigines to reinforce existing community identities or form new ones centred on permanent, institutional settlements. It illustrates that these Aboriginal communal identities are not based purely on a distant, 'traditional' past, but are historical constructs, which change over time.

The institutions which isolated Aborigines in rural settings had a double-edged character which recalls the ghettos of early modern Europe as well as the twentieth-century ghettos of American cities. The word ghetto is used specifically to evoke the ambiguous relationship between Aboriginal people and these institutions. Like the ghettos of other lands, outback missions simultaneously oppressed and nurtured the communities they confined. These institutions offered a haven from the hostile, outside world and a basis for community solidarity and consolidation in contrast to that world.

Louis Wirth's description of Jewish ghettos, encapsulates many Aboriginal institutional experiences:

> The world at large was cold and strange . . . but within the ghetto he felt free. Within the circle of his own tribal group he received that appreciation, sympathy and understanding which the larger world could not offer. In his own community, which was based upon the solidarity of the families that composed it, he was a person with status.[4]

But there the similarities end. There is no intention to demonstrate the existence of underlying structural similarities between Aboriginal missions and places called ghettos elsewhere in the world. The operation of Aboriginal missions and government stations, with their paternalistic/dictatorial non-Aboriginal administrative structures, were very different from the largely self-administered urban ghettos.

The context of research

This study is situated in the context of a considerable body of previous research. Two of the most influential schools of thought on Aboriginal history stand almost diametrically opposed to each other. One, which reflects nineteenth- and early twentieth-century attitudes, views white, colonial authority as all powerful, dominating technologically and culturally 'primitive' Aborigines, who are unable to cope with the challenge of European 'settlement'.[5] The other insists that Aboriginal people have made their own history, first by heroically resisting the white invaders and subsequently battling to 'survive in their own land'. The second, more recent school predominates today, but has not obliterated the legacy of the first.[6]

In the past Aborigines were commonly portrayed as helpless victims and this view is perpetuated through the language which continues to be used to describe the colonial situation. There is the convenient myth that the act of 'settlement' was swift and not resisted by Aborigines and that superior technology rightfully predominated over people with outmoded, 'primitive' crafts. Australian history has thus ignored the presence and displacement of Aborigines. This historical interpretation of the past is reinforced by the legal doctrine that Australia was 'terra nullius', even though it is known that the continent was inhabited at the time of British colonisation.[7] This legal and political fiction presents the land as 'settled' by 'settlers', rather than invaded by a colonial power which unsettled Aborigines and provoked them into periodic violent resistance. In the colonial state 'protection' took on a new meaning. The accepted definition 'to defend or guard from injury or danger; to shield; to keep safe, take care of; to extend patronage to'[8] was supplanted by new connotations of isolation, discrimination, institutionalisation and invisibility. 'Protecting' Aborigines meant removing them from the sight and awareness of the general Australian population, restraining them within carefully defined lands, maintaining them as unproductive, dependent communities which could act as labour pools in times of labour shortage, singling out Aborigines as different from the rest of the population. Aboriginal attempts to deal with this process of 'protection' and institutionalisation and Aboriginal responses to it will be extensively examined in this book.

The strategies Aborigines developed to aid their survival can only be understood when the detailed circumstances of their oppression are exposed. This exposure is occurring now on many fronts: through Aboriginal political activity, which has become increasingly vocal and visible since the Second World War; through Aboriginal writers and dramatists who articulate their people's experiences for a wider audience and reveal the double standards that have applied in the treatment of Aborigines;[9] and also through the growing awareness of non-Aboriginal writers and social scientists that most Australians falsely perceive their past.[10] This view acknowledges that, despite the oppression of the colonial situation, Aborigines were active agents in their interaction with the colonisers. Within the context of this current research, this book seeks to determine as precisely as possible which constraints were most important in inhibiting Aboriginal action and which strategies were most effective in ensuring survival, self-respect, community cohesion and economic well-being. Three case studies are used to illustrate these historical circumstances of Aborigines. Each case demonstrates that Aborigines were making choices about the direction their lives would take. Often their preferred line of action was blocked or huge obstacles were put in the way of their progress, but there is evidence of great perseverance in the face of these impediments.

One option which faced many Aborigines was the possibility of aligning themselves with a mission or government station. This study will consider how the decision to move on to an institution affected Aboriginal ability to survive. Survival in this context is not defined by the maintenance of a gene pool, but by the persistence of a communal identity.[11] The unplanned effect of protective government policies and institutionalisation was to create strong, sedentary Aboriginal communities with close-knit but extended kinship networks. While the assimilation and integration policies of the post-war era reversed some of the worst restrictions of protectionism, they have also been criticised as highly destructive of Aboriginal society, because their aim was to break up these communities and assimilate individuals into mainstream society.[12]

American Indian and Aboriginal history—contrasts and parallels

There is a substantial literature on the subject of agency and options for survival in American Indian (also referred to as Amerindian) history and anthropology which helps to define some key issues. Amerindian history was established earlier in the USA and Canada than was Aboriginal history in Australia. As a result, many of the issues which are only now being professionally investigated in Aboriginal history have previously been broached in the USA and Canada. The research and writing of Amerindian history began in the late 1940s and 1950s, stimulated by the legal battles over land claims based on treaties signed by specific Indian groups.[13] Twentieth-century descendants of these people had to prove in court that they were the descendants of the signatories, so they employed anthropologists and historians to justify their claims.[14] But even before this legal tussle, anthropologists had begun studying cultural change among Amerindians in an historical context—looking at change over time.

Early anthropological thinking on both sides of the Atlantic had been dominated by evolutionary assumptions. Franz Boas in America (and the functionalists in Britain) were

the first to look at the cultures of indigenous peoples as 'neither moral examples nor living fossils but simply different and equally valued'.[15] But this new generation of anthropologists wanted to study these indigenous cultures in their pure, unchanged state before colonial intervention. Cultures that existed prior to and at the point of European contact were deemed to be within the anthropologist's field of interest. Changes, which occurred after contact, fell within the historian's area of expertise: 'What happened to the California Indians in the years following 1849—their disruptions, losses, sufferings, and adjustments—fall into the purview of the historian rather than of the anthropologist whose prime concern is the purely aboriginal, the uncontaminated native.'[16] It was not until the 1930s and 1940s that there was a change of emphasis from 'how culture is received to how it is created'[17] and historical perspectives were incorporated into anthropological theory and practice.

Ralph Linton was a major influence in bringing about this shift of emphasis in anthropology. In 1940 he edited a book which considered seven Amerindian tribes and their process of 'acculturation'.[18] Linton defined acculturation as 'comprehend[ing] those phenomena which result when groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous first hand contact with subsequent changes in the original culture patterns of either or both'. This definition implies a voluntary two-way process, but he goes on to discuss directed cultural change whereby the dominant group tries to control its own environment: a situation of relevance to colonial conditions.[19] The case studies in Linton's book document changes in seven Indian communities as a result of the influence, direct and indirect, of Europeans and show how the Indians responded to these forces of change. Indians are presented in Linton's work as active agents in their own historical development, adopting some European innovations, rejecting others, or adapting them to their own purposes.

An instructive contrast can be drawn between Linton's work and that of his Australian contemporary, A. P. Elkin. Elkin, an influential figure in Australian anthropology and the first Australian to occupy a chair of anthropology in Australia, was heavily influenced by evolutionary assumptions. He believed that hunter-gatherers had to progress through predictable stages before they could become assimilated into the colonial society and culture. Writing ten years after Linton, Elkin still perceived Aborigines from a superior colonial viewpoint: 'The general picture all over Australia from 1788 onward is that on first contact with definite settlement the Aborigines are usually shy and harmless.'[20]

Elkin believed Aborigines were moving on a set course from the unchanging traditional past towards assimilation into European society. He developed a paradigm of Aboriginal reaction which suggested Aborigines ultimately had only two options in the face of European domination: assimilation or 'return to the mat' through breakdown of their society and disillusionment.[21] Elkin characterised Aborigines as lacking curiosity, only adapting to the pastoral economy (he generalises from a narrow data base)[22] out of necessity, not a desire to change. These 'intelligent parasites' did the minimal amount of work to sustain their communities, they only gave the appearance of adapting, their 'real' life was 'their own world of traditional security, mythological depth, social warmth, ritual and technical efficiency'. 'Acculturation' was not possible in

this rigid, unchanging traditional world. The only alternative to assimilation was disintegration.[23]

Anthropologists interpreting Amerindian society within a changing historical context moved beyond this concept of the ethnographic present long before some of their colleagues in Australia.[24] Edward H. Spicer writing in the early 1960s criticised Elkin's 'invariant sequences' of reaction suggesting they were meaningless without statements of the conditions of contact between indigenous people and Europeans.[25] Spicer built on the groundwork laid by Linton, distinguishing between directed and non-directed cultural change among American Indians, though asserting that change can be directed in one period and non-directed in another. He presented the Mandan as an example of non-directed cultural change. Their first contact with Europeans was through the fur-traders in the eighteenth century. They adapted their economy to these new trade possibilities, adopting aspects of European technology that suited them and rejecting others. But in the nineteenth century Mandan numbers were decimated by several epidemics and their situation changed dramatically.[26] The Yacqui, of the south-west, on the other hand experienced directed change through the presence of Jesuit missionaries who proselytised among them. The missionaries were accepted as authoritative figures within Yacqui communities, where they established a programme and organisation to implement change.[27] Spicer's point is that there is no invariable inevitable series of changes resulting from the colonisation of indigenous peoples as Elkin insisted, but that changing circumstances require changing strategies by the colonised if they are to survive.[28]

The emphasis in Amerindian ethnohistory on cultural change and the agency of Indians is still evident today. One of its foremost proponents is James Axtell, whose article on the ethnohistory of missions is of direct relevance to this study. He asks what are the criteria for judging success or failure of a missionary programme?[29] He suggests that generally this question has been answered using the *missionaries'* criteria of number of baptisms and similar indicators, rather than considering the question from the Indian viewpoint and asking the supplementary question, why did Indians convert to Christianity? The answer to this question must be that Christianity provided solutions to urgent social and religious problems that Indians faced at that point in their cultural history.

Axtell takes as a case study the 'praying towns' of New England established by an English missionary, John Eliot.[30] At the time Eliot was proselytising, the eastern Massachusetts had been decimated by disease and faced the alternatives of revitalising or dying. Large numbers chose to convert, which entailed wholesale cultural change but preserved their ethnic identity. Axtell suggests that the success or failure of missions from an Indian perspective is premised on whether they assist ethnic survival. The conversion of the Indians must be seen as a tragic loss if the pre-contact Indian is seen as the only true Indian, but if ethnic survival is the yardstick, then the missions were a success. Axtell concludes that the Indians, not the missionaries, decided the rate and timing of their conversion. They chose to establish a 'praying town' to maintain the communal life of the group where it was threatened with disintegration, but when their cultural resources and sovereignty were unimpaired they chose selectively from the

missionaries' offerings. The Indians were making active choices about how they would best survive.[31]

Similar issues arise in Aboriginal history. Axtell's conclusions about the Massachusetts and their use of the 'praying towns' have parallels in Aborigines' use of missions in their strategies for survival. Marshall Sahlins has characterised this view of cultural change as 'externally induced, yet indigenously orchestrated [and is] present everywhere in human experience'.[32]

The three Aboriginal communities which will be considered are from distinct but over-lapping historic periods in different parts of South Australia and represent very different Aboriginal experiences. They also have much in common. The three communities survived the devastation caused by colonisation, but in different ways. They experienced institutionalisation on missions, but in different eras and for differing lengths of time. The first community was established by people who went to Poonindie Anglican mission on southern Eyre Peninsula, north of Port Lincoln. The mission was established in the first assimilationist period by Archdeacon Mathew Hale in 1850 and closed in the 1890s. The initial members of this institution were Aborigines who had first contact with the colonisers around Adelaide and along the Murray River.

The second community was on the west coast of South Australia where Aborigines encountered Europeans later than the people of the Adelaide Plains and Murray River. Pastoralists came to the area in the 1860s and agriculturists in the 1890s. A Lutheran mission, Koonibba, was established in 1898 introducing the first experiences of institutionalisation to Aborigines in the region. This mission opened only a few years after the closure of Poonindie, at a time when government was again taking an active role in Aboriginal affairs following decades in which its role was limited to making rations available for distribution.

Finally, the fortunes of the Adnyamathanha of the Flinders Ranges will be traced. These people had a long experience of interaction with non-Aboriginal people through the pastoral industry and spasmodic mining in the Ranges stretching back to the 1850s. It was not until the depression years in 1930 that they first experienced mission life. This came at a time when assimilationist policies were once again gaining some currency, although their implementation in the 1950s had much less impact on the Adnyamathanha than upon the west coast people. For a variety of reasons, which will be analysed later, the Adnyamathanha had a less intense experience of institutionalisation than the other communities under study. The mission did not form the community as at Poonindie and Koonibba; rather, the missionaries attached themselves to a strongly self-identified group. Oral testimony as well as written records clearly testify to the people's use of the mission as a means of survival.

Several themes recur throughout this work. A major issue is the segregation and institutionalisation of Aborigines. This must be understood against the background of government policies and community attitudes towards Aborigines in the last 150 years, which will be discussed in the next chapter. Few Aboriginal communities have escaped the experience of institutionalisation in southern Australia. In South Australia, for instance, of the 14,000 people in the State who identify as Aboriginal today, the vast majority have experienced institutionalisation or are descended from people who have.

One must conclude from this that institutionalisation, while discriminatory and often harsh, has been a major factor in the survival of Aboriginal communities.[33]

A parallel can certainly be drawn here with the role of ghettos in the survival of a distinctive Jewish identity and strong kinship and communal networks. This Jewish identity has been maintained long after the abandonment of the ghettos, but in a climate of continued discrimination:

> When the ghetto walls do finally crumble, at least sufficiently to permit the escape of some of the inmates, those that get a taste of the life in the freer world outside and are lured by its colour are likely to be torn . . . On the one hand there is the strange and fascinating world of man; on the other, the restricted sectarianism of a little group into which he happened to be born, of neither of which he is fully a member. He oscillates between the two until a decisive incident either throws him headlong into activities of the outer world . . . or else a rebuff sends him bounding into his old familiar primary group, where life, though puny in scale, is rich and deep and warm.[34]

The *raison d'être* for the establishment and maintenance of Aboriginal institutions has shifted many times. Initially they aimed to segregate Aborigines to facilitate their training, education and Christianisation;[35] later in the nineteenth century segregation was advocated to protect Aborigines from the destructive interaction with a 'superior civilisation'.[36] By the twentieth century Aborigines were removed from the general community so that they would not contaminate it by their proximity;[37] and most recently it was argued that special homes be provided to train Aborigines of mixed descent to become assimilated into Australian society.[38] Yet, whatever the professed aim, the long-term outcomes were certainly not planned by those who established the institutions. The Aborigines used the institutions as a base for the establishment of communities with strong identities.[39] The people at Poonindie became Poonindie people and many of their descendants today identify their ancestry as Poonindie, rather than Murray River or Adelaide plains. People who came from Koonibba are also likely to claim it as an identifying label, rather than using pre-existing language groups such as Kokatha or Wirangu as communal identities. Even the Adnyamathanha, who had formed their modern identity before the missionaries appeared, refer to the mission settlement, Nepabunna, as 'their home'.

Other themes which recur throughout the book are the role of Aborigines in the labour force, education and the effects of the natural and manmade environment on Aborigines. The historical record indicates that while Aborigines from the three regions under study were prepared to incorporate themselves within the money economy, the mainstream society was determined to keep them out, except where it depended on Aboriginal labour to maintain the economic viability of particular enterprises.[40] Training and education of Aborigines illustrate the non-Aboriginal Australian's double standards in relation to Aborigines. Prior to the 1960s, attempts to train and educate Aborigines were spasmodic as well as futile. The aim of education could only be to train them for a role in the general community, while other policies ensured that they remained segregated in institutions.[41]

Another factor affecting Aboriginal responses to European invasion of their lands was the local environment and its gradual alteration. The rugged terrain of the Flinders

Ranges or the dense mallee on Eyre Peninsula offered the Aborigines refuge from European attacks, unlike the open plains in other regions. The dense urban development of Australia's large cities elicited very different responses from local Aborigines than did pastoral or agricultural development elsewhere.

The major impetus of this book stops with the disbandment of the missions and the end of segregation and discriminatory government policies and legislation towards Aborigines, although it may be argued that the segregationist attitudes of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century have taken a new guise in the late twentieth century. This is shown, for example, in high rates of imprisonment to which Aborigines have been subjected as they move into the general community.

Notes

1 PRG 275/130/207, Mortlock Library of South Australiana.
2 GRG 52/1/1945/63, SA Public Record Office.
3 GRG 52/1/1948/36.
4 Louis Wirth, *The ghetto,* Chicago, 1928, p. 26.
5 For example, Kathleen Hassell, *The relations between the settlers and Aborigines in South Australia, 1836–1860* Adelaide, 1966 (published MA thesis from 1921).
6 For example, see Anne Bickford, 'Contact history: Aborigines in New South Wales after 1788', *Australian Aboriginal Studies,* no. 1, 1988. This convenient misconception reflects views held by colonists in North America, 'Another approach was to ignore indigenous people altogether. In a symbolic sense their land was vacant and therefore available. This mythconception appears in early as well as recent writing. One advocate of English colonization wrote in 1662 that, "to us they cannot come, our land is full; to them we may go, their land is empty . . . their land is spacious and void, and there are few and do but run over the grass, as do also the foxes and wild beasts" ' (Cushman 1963 [1622]:91) William S. Simmons, 'Culture theory in contemporary ethnohistory', *Ethnohistory,* 35(1) 1988, pp. 2–3.
7 Julie Cassidy, 'The significance of the classification of a colonial acquisition: the conquered/settled distinction', *Australian Aboriginal Studies,* no. 1, 1988.
8 *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary.*
9 For example, Jack Davis, Colin Johnson (Mudrooroo Narogin), Oodgeroo Noonuccal (Kath Walker).
10 Humphrey McQueen, *A new Britannia,* Melbourne, 1982, p. 18; R. White, *Inventing Australia,* Sydney, 1981, p. 70.
11 The Lumbee of North Carolina in the USA are an extreme example of the potency of this point. They are defined and define themselves as Indians even though it is impossible to trace any Indian antecedents, but they have a strong identity based on a communal past stretching back over many decades: Karen I. Blu, *The Lumbee problem. The making of an American Indian people,* New York, 1980.
12 Mudrooroo Narogin is a strong exponent of this view. He is critical of Aboriginal people who do not maintain a strong group identity. In his recent book *Writing from the fringe* (Melbourne, 1990, pp. 149, 159) he criticises authors such as Ella Simon, Sally Morgan and Glenyse Ward for being individualist or assimilationist and not putting the concerns of the Aboriginal community first.
13 Harold Hickerson, *The Chippewa and their neighbors: a study in ethnohistory,* New York, 1970, pp. 7–8.
14 A comparable situation did not arise in Australia until the *Land Rights (NT) Act,* 1976.
15 Simmons, 'Culture theory', p. 3.
16 Simmons, 'Culture theory', pp. 3–4, quoting Alfred Kroeber, 'The nature of land-holding groups in Aboriginal California' in Robert Heizer (ed.), *Aboriginal California. Three studies in culture history,* California, 1961 [1954].

17 Simmons, 'Culture theory', p. 4.

18 Ralph Linton (ed.), *Acculturation in seven American Indian tribes*, Gloucester, Massachusetts, 1940.

19 Linton (ed.), Acculturation, pp. 501, 504.

20 A. P. Elkin, 'Reaction and interaction: a food gathering people and European settlement in Australia', *American Anthropologist*, 53, 1951, p. 166.

21 Elkin, 'Reaction and interaction', p. 178.

22 Heather Goodall, 'An intelligent parasite: and white perceptions of the history of Aboriginal people in New South Wales', unpublished paper presented at the Australian Historical Association conference, 1982, p. 18.

23 Elkin, 'Reaction and interaction', pp. 169, 170, 176.

24 Bruce Trigger regarded this attitude as belonging to the nineteenth century, where change was interpreted as a process of cultural disintegration or assimilation. He went on to say that it was now clear that indigenous cultures did not begin to change as a result of the arrival of the first Europeans, but that change had been a characteristic of Amerindian cultures since they arrived in the western hemisphere: Bruce G. Trigger, 'Ethnohistory: problems and prospects', *Ethnohistory*, 29(1), 1982, pp. 11–12. Of course Elkin's attitudes cannot be generalised to all Australian anthropologists of the time, for instance W. E. H. Stanner's postwar work took cognisance of change over time, for example, W. E. H. Stanner, 'Continuity and change among Aborigines' (1958), *White man got no dreaming: essays 1938–1973*, Canberra, 1979.

25 Edward H. Spicer, 'Types of contact and processes of change' in Edward H. Spicer (ed.), *Perspectives in American Indian cultural change*, Chicago, 1969, p. 541.

26 Spicer, 'Types of contact and processes of change', in Spicer, *Perspectives*, p. 522; Edward M. Bruner, 'Mandan' in Spicer, *Perspectives* (first published 1961), pp. 205, 208–9.

27 Spicer, *Perspectives*, p. 522.

28 One commentator has gone so far as to describe Spicer as primarily a historian rather than anthropologist. See William Y. Adams, 'Edward Spicer, Historian', *Journal of the South West*, 32, 1990.

29 James Axtell, 'Some thoughts on the ethnohistory of missions', *Ethnohistory*, 29 (1), 1982, pp. 35–6.

30 Axtell, 'Some thoughts', pp. 36–9.

31 Axtell, 'Some thoughts', p. 39.

32 Marshall Sahlins, *Islands of History*, Chicago, 1985, viii, quoted in Simmons, 'Culture theory', p. 7.

33 Figure from 1986 census. Jane Jacobs points out that the Kokatha who did not use Koonibba as a permanent base, but moved along the Transcontinental railway line or from mission to mission, were not able to maintain such close community links and this affected their social organisation: Jane Jacobs, 'Aboriginal land rights in Port Augusta', MA thesis, University of Adelaide, 1983, pp. 215–16.

34 Wirth, *The ghetto*, pp. 289–90. It is interesting to note that the language Wirth uses here to describe the warm familiarity and depth of ghetto life is echoed in Elkin's description of Aboriginal traditional life—'traditional security, mythological depth, social warmth . . . ': 'Reaction and interaction', p. 170.

35 The original rationale for the establishment of the Native Training Institution at Poonindie.

36 This was the aim of most institutions which existed from the late nineteenth until the mid-twentieth century, including the first years of Koonibba mission.

37 The protective institutions also fulfilled this function, for example, Koonibba, Point Pearce, Point McLeay and other missions in the south of the State. The government stations in Western Australia such as Moore River Native Settlement were notorious for their role of protecting the general community from contamination of Aborigines: see Anna Haebich, *For their own good. Aborigines and government in the Southwest of Western Australia, 1900–1940*, Perth,1988, pp. 304–6.

38 For example, St Francis Boys Home, Colebrook Home in Adelaide.

39 C. D. Rowley suggested that most Aboriginal ties in eastern Australia were not 'tribal', but common traditions of an institutionalised sub-group: C. D. Rowley, *Outcasts in white Australia*, Victoria, 1972, p. 169.

40 Similar attitudes are evident in other parts of Australia, for example, Anna Haebich, *For their own good*, pp. 74–5, 162, 354–5; P. E. Felton, 'Aboriginal employment problems in Victoria', in Ian G. Sharp and Colin M. Tatz (eds), *Aborigines in the economy*, Melbourne, 1966, p. 91; Barry Morris, 'From underemployment to unemployment: the changing role of Aborigines in a rural economy', *Mankind*, 13 (6).

41 Albert Namatjira is a tragic example of an Aborigine who was successfully trained in European skills, but rejected by European/Australian society; another example is David Unaipon from Point McLeay.