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THE NORTHERN TERRITORY: AN ABORIGINAL VIEW OF THE PAST

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In 1975 we were preparing a source book of the Northern Territory for the Northern Territory Curriculum Branch. There was a thick book at the end of it, but it was evident to us that only one section of the population was represented. That was the European, and only the literate part of that. The Aboriginal view of the past was simply not available from history books, nor, except to Aboriginal children, from anywhere else. It was obvious, that to produce an Aboriginal history of the Territory, we would have to move from reading the written word to listening to the spoken.

This was the task we set ourselves for 1977-78. Employed by the Curriculum Branch, and backed by the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, we would act as editors in the task of presenting an Aboriginal history of the Northern Territory to school children. All interviews and discussions would be taped, and cassettes made to go with each booklet of transcriptions and illustrations.

Faced with an enormous amount of material, vast distances to cover, and not unlimited time, we decided, rather than produce a hotch-potch volume of what we had managed to record, to edit a series of shorter books on different themes. Some are on specific topics, like the Coniston massacre, or wartime recollections. Other topics are more general but no less interesting: how, when and why did Aboriginal people give up (or were forced to give up) traditional life; how they adapted to the European intrusion; why there has been a shift to out-stations and a preference for bicultural education?

Obviously we have not been able to visit large areas of the Territory. We chose mostly to visit places where we already knew someone. Often this was the teacher, who would ask the community in advance if it were interested in taking part in the project. Almost everywhere, the older people were keen to tell stories of the early days, especially when they knew their words would be heard and read by children throughout the Territory. Generally the stories are no older than the third generation, and in English.

In talking to older people we are tapping the resources of a non-literate people with all its skills. If you carry your culture in your head, so to speak, the skill of memory and the art of story telling are far in advance of those of literate societies. Coupled with on-site photographs, the effect is often remarkable. The story of the shooting at Gordon Creek related below was told at a lunch stop, just after we had visited the site. Apart from its historical value, it is a superb example of the story-teller's art, full of dramatic pauses, improvised speeches and epigrammatic flourishes.

The story we were told illustrates the distortion of history by omission, through the neglect of the Aboriginal viewpoint. At Yaralin, near Victoria River Downs, Old Mick Kanginnung and Little Mick Inginma told us two related stories. Two men, Mulligan and Ligar, were travelling through Jasper Gorge in 1895. There they were surprised and attacked at night. Both men were injured, but managed to escape. Their story appeared in column after scandalised column in the *Northern Territory Times*, and had a consequence in the setting up of the Timber Creek police station. Old Mick's story agreed in general with the newspaper account, although there is the usual disagreement over the causes (treacherous nature of Aboriginals v. the possession of Aboriginal women by the white men).

As far as the *Northern Territory Times* was concerned, that was the end of the story. But the Victoria River settlers were not content with the arrest and trial of two men. At that time there was another police station at Gordon Creek, some 40 km from the Victoria River Downs homestead. The resident policeman was a Constable O'Keefe - his name is still remembered. Two Bilingnara women living near the station were sent out, soon after the Jasper Gorge incident, to fetch as many of their country-men as they could find, "to get a job". The people were brought in, Little Mick Inginma related. They were given a meal, then chained up to some trees, one of which is still standing. "Why are we being chained up like a dog?" O'Keefe replied, "To quieten you." Later in the afternoon the people were released and told to run away. They ran from the creek, but the trackers were already stationed in hiding. The whole group was shot dead. Thus were the Bilingnara punished for an attack which had, in fact, been carried out by Ngaliwuru men.

Some schools in the Territory and elsewhere are already collecting contact stories, especially those concerned with the bilingual program. Often though, contact stories take second place to legend, and in any case, Aboriginal oral history (like other oral history) has been totally neglected by historians. It seems that

there could be an opportunity for teachers and communities to get together to record local history, to make it available for children in the classroom, and to have it on record for the future. One wonders whether, with increased literacy, some of the skills of memorising and story telling will be lost: so the full story of what happened is lost. Aboriginal children have a right to be able to read an Aboriginal view of our common Australian history alongside the European, and white children must know that events can appear quite differently when viewed from the perspective of another culture, and that Aboriginal history is as much part of Australian history as that contained in any book. In a perfect world, our children would come to realise that there is not one history, but many, not one way of telling the story, but many, and that there is no knowledge of the past save in the eyes of *all* witnesses.

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"The True History of Australia"

The Black Resource Centre of Brisbane has produced a four page broadsheet entitled *The True History of Australia*. The broadsheet is in a cartoon-type format and presents a condensed history of Australia from an Aboriginal point of view.

Copies may be obtained by contacting :

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