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BOOK REVIEW

The Aboriginal Children's History of Australia. Written and Illustrated by Australia's Aboriginal Children. Rigby Limited, Adelaide. Produced in association with Island Heritage Limited, Hawaii with the assistance of the Aboriginal Arts Board of the Australia Council.

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This, as Wandjuk Marika, Chairman of the Aboriginal Arts Board, notes in the foreword, is a unique book. From Aboriginal children all round Australia have been collected stories and pictures which, skilfully edited to make a progression through time, depict Australian history from the Dreaming, through sections headed Old Time, the Macassans, the Whitefellas, up to Today and finally My Country.

For Wandjuk Marika, the book's uniqueness lies in "the element of surprise and joy in what the children see", in "their enjoyment and enthusiasm for the land which has been theirs for over 40,000 years." For many readers there will be a uniqueness also in the perspective from which the book has been created. We are accustomed, in textbooks and histories which mention Aboriginal life at all, to references which either ignorantly denigrate it or else blandly gloss over barbarities in the white conquest of the country.

Here is the other side of the story, in words and pictures which are stark, matter of fact, without lamentation or recrimination. The children are simply telling what happened as they have been told it -

The white men rounded up a mob. They started looking for the killers. The white men saw some Aboriginals in a camp. They surrounded them in a circle and shot every one of them. The killers were running away but the white blokes shot other Aboriginals.

For non-Aboriginal Australians, both adults and children, no record of the past could be more humbling.

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Bitter aspects of the present are similarly presented without euphemism. The words in which we often cloak tragedy and hope, words like 'alcoholism', 'urban alienation', 'rehabilitation', are stripped away in this child's account of his uncle -

Once he stopped drinking for a few months and when he was coming back to Adelaide he thought he'd buy a flagon for his brother. But he drank it himself and got back on the grog. After that he drank for a long time and didn't work or even worry about food. He was always down the parklands or in gaol. All his friends were the same. He got real bad and went to a place for drunks. He went back a few times before he stopped but now he doesn't drink anymore. He's trying to stop young Nungas getting on the grog when they come to the cities, and feel lonely and scared. My uncle's 38 and he's been in lots of gaols. Most of his brothers and sisters are dead. Most of his friends are still down in the parklands or dead.

Not much surprise and joy so far. But indeed, as Wandjuk Marika says, these are the qualities that leap from most pages of this book. There is an immense delight in the land itself, a sharp eye for its detail, from the vividness of the opening sentence of the Dreaming sequence -

The sea rushed to touch the shore; along the shore stood white hills, they were sacred hills, for this was the land where our two Creators landed.

to the imaginative painting in the last section, My Country, of a bare landscape that has defeated the white settlers, surveyed by the survivor, a lizard, through the round mouth of his hollow log.

The book can be seen as a work of art, literature and history by Aboriginal children; as a work of art, literature and history by children; or simply as a work of art and literature and history.

Viewed in its Aboriginal perspective, the book should be an important member of home and school libraries. For not only, as Wandjuk Marika puts it, has it "awakened Aboriginal children to an awareness of (their) identity and a pride in their past" but it may well awaken in *non*-Aboriginal children (and adults) a greater appreciation of that identity. There is rich source material here for social studies teachers. There are, for example, detailed descriptions of traditional ways of life, demonstrating a pride in the methods of the past -

In the old times, we didn't have matches or lighters to make fire, but we had our own idea. The old people would cut two dry sticks, a soft flat one and a hard round one. They put the flat stick on the ground then made a hole in it and put some dry grass in the hole. Then they twist the sticks around and around between their two hands, rubbing hard until smoke comes. They keep going until fire comes and then put it in with the firewood to make the fire.

In the section My Homeland, some of the children express delight in keeping these old and tried methods alive -

Our place is Archer. We live there, my little brother and I and my father. We live there. That is our place. We like our own place. We like camping, and we like to ride a horse. We were camped out at our place. We cook our damper in the sand. We make our home from ti-tree bark. We hunt for yams, fish, goanna and other food that we can find. The men make spears and woomeras. They hunt for pigs, duck and goanna, and they spear the pig and they carry the pig to their camping place. They cook the pig. They dig a big hole and they put the pig into the hole and they cover it.

Such passages might well take their place in social studies discussions concerning the values inherent in different life styles. What we sometimes called the emergent values - a stress on co-operation rather than competition, on the importance of the present rather than the future, on harmony with nature rather than its domination - are also the traditional Aboriginal values, and all are exemplified in this book.

As well as the common Aboriginal identity that remarkably manifests itself through the work of a multitude of contributors, readers will also find much diversity. Aboriginal people, like others, differ in life styles and in attitudes on many issues. Such differences come through clearly; for example, in the section on mining. As one contributor puts it: "Some people said 'no' for the mining. Some people said 'yes' for the mining." The benefits to be reaped are longingly anticipated by one child from Aurukun -

I would like to work for the mining company and get money for myself, to make a house for me and my family. I would make lots of money and go right around the world to see all the different places. We could travel by car, train, bus and plane so we could see the

cities and towns. We could buy some land too. The mining men work day and night. They get lots of money. I wish I could work for the mining company. I would like to drive a Haulpak.

A more traditional view is put by a child from Yirrkala -

It was at Gove at the place called Nhulunbuy that the white men came and settled down to work. My people thought that it was very bad because they came and pulled down our sacred trees that my father's father used for hunting and dancing place. The Riratjingu and Gomaitj own this country.

Wuyal was the wild honey spirit. He made the mountain at Nhulunbuy and everywhere he went he left sugarbag for the people. The mining people put a water tank on Wuyal's mountain. Our people were very sad and angry.

The gamut of Aboriginal diversity is not covered in the book. Though there are a few contributions from Sydney, Perth and Adelaide and one or two splendid pictures of cities - including the Opera House painted by a Territorian - there is no presentation of what life means to the many Aboriginal boys and girls who live in cities, and one wonders why. The foreword makes appreciative mention of the teachers "who made this project a part of their school activities." Perhaps such teachers were more enthusiastic or successful in eliciting stories and pictures in remoter schools, with greater numbers of Aboriginal pupils.

Apropos of teacher influence, it is worth noting that although school is mentioned in passing by one or two contributors, the subjects that have fired the imaginations of these young writers and artists nowhere include what goes on at school. Is there a lesson for teachers here?

Viewed as a literary, artistic and historical production by children, the book has all the appeal of spontaneity, sometimes unconscious humour and directness that children's works so often have. But it has more. As a production in its own right, it is impressive as a collection of statements diverse in their subject matter and point of view, unified in their honesty, their down-to-earth observation, their joyous affirmation of love for their country. Many of the paintings (a very few of which make use of Aboriginal motifs) are remarkable for their sweeping and subtle use of colour, their evocation of place and atmosphere. The written contributions form

a gripping and consecutive chronicle that even the few quotations given here demonstrate. But these quotations have not brought out the poetry of much of the writing.

Finally, as history, the book gives an account of Australia's story with different contours, different emphases from the story most of us know that begins with the arrival of the Dutch explorers. In this new but infinitely older history, the Dreaming, with the coming of the light, with Wandjina, with Japara the Moon Man and Wuriuprenala the Sun Woman, slides with no perceptible break into the traditional life of the people; the friendly visits of the Macassans "who came from Indonesia with the wind", are set alongside the violence that followed the European arrival; the explorers, helpless in the desert, survive through the assistance of Aboriginal guides; the missionaries come; the Japanese and Europeans have "a tribal war. They almost killed Bathurst Island with the bomb"; children are stolen from their parents "and taken by the government men to Mapoon. They were our mothers and fathers and they never saw our grandparents any more"; mining changes the face of the country; the Wattie Creek saga ends with the handing back of the land; "today we are working for our own land with horses and cattle in the stock camp." This is a history that may give the non-Aboriginal reader some salutary jolts.

The very end of this history is enigmatic, even foreboding:

We made our camp here, and now all that is left of our presence are the ashes and the bones of the dead animals the young men had killed. Soon even our footprints will be carried away by the wind.

One closes the book, and from the back cover's final illustration bursts the glowing promise of a new day.

Will the next generation of Aboriginal children see themselves holding a respected and secure place in future chapters of their country's history?

It is now for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australia to see that a less chilling answer than that perhaps foretold on the book's last page is blowing in the wind.

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