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ACROSS AUSTRALIA....

FROM TEACHER TO TEACHER

THE EDUCATION OF ABORIGINAL CHILDREN
IN NEW SOUTH WALES PUBLIC SCHOOLS
SINCE 1788

Part 1

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The following article by Mr Harris discusses in detail the history of Aboriginal education in New South Wales. Readers from New South Wales will certainly find this extremely interesting and, indeed, the perspective that Mr Harris offers will deepen their insights into the educational status of Aboriginals today. Readers from other states will, I am sure, also find it very illuminating; in many ways the New South Wales scene was similar to that in other parts of Australia. (Ed.)

It is especially important that all who are in any way involved in the education of Aboriginal children gain an insight into the Aboriginal experience which has moulded present day attitudes to authority, schools and white society generally. Much of the information about the early years of black/white contact in Australia was never recorded, or has been lost, while the greater part of what remains has not been in a format or location readily accessible to the public. Fortunately, a number of concerned researchers including Rowley,¹ Woolmington,² Prentis,³ and Gale and Brookman,⁴ have gathered some of the available information and their publications are a welcome, albeit long overdue contribution to an otherwise meagre knowledge of the Aboriginal past. There are also a number of people - although still far too few - who are endeavouring to salvage and publish what remains of Aboriginal oral history in New South Wales. Some outstanding examples are Ferry^{5,6} and Mathews⁷ on the North-West plains and Hagan⁸ on the South Coast.

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Very few attempts have been made to *collect and make available* information specifically on the history of Aboriginal education. There have been a number of University theses but the information is still relatively inaccessible while it remains in that form. The only attempts known to the writer to specifically research the history of Aboriginal education in New South Wales Public Schools, *and to make this information available*, have been the painstaking efforts in the New South Wales Education Department's archives by Fletcher^{9,10} of the Department's Curriculum and Research Branch, and to a lesser degree, the author's papers,^{11,12} prepared for Aboriginal education conferences in New South Wales. However, both Fletcher's and the author's papers were published internally only, and it is to rectify this and to make the information readily available that this paper is being written.

The author has a particular interest in the history of the education of Aboriginal children in Government schools since about 1900 because it is very important, even in some places urgent, that educators understand the educational experience of the parents and grandparents of the Aboriginal children presently in school, and in the light of this knowledge, understand more clearly the reasons for the Aboriginal child's attitudes, responses and levels of achievement. However, in order to present the complete picture, this paper will first deal, although briefly, with education up to 1900. The author acknowledges his indebtedness for information up to 1900 to the published results of researchers such as Rowley,¹³ Woolmington,¹⁴ and Fletcher.¹⁵ The period since 1900 is treated in greater depth and much of the information is derived from primary sources, some now published for the first time.

THE FIRST 60 YEARS - TRAGEDY

There was, of course, no such thing as public education for anyone during this period. There was, however, a concern for 'civilizing' the Aboriginals.

Governor Macquarie, worried about continual hostility between Aboriginals and settlers (and not entirely blaming the Aboriginals) believed that the only long-term method of achieving a friendly relationship was via the education of Aboriginal children. He set this out clearly in his communications with Lord Bathurst in 1814, and proposed an educational experiment which resulted in the establishment of his Native Institution at Parramatta.¹⁶ Macquarie's views were those of an educated Westerner of that era, and as all education was religious in Britain at the time, it was natural that

Macquarie should think in terms of a missionary enterprise. He placed an ex-missionary, Mr William Shelley, in charge. If Mr Shelley's educational philosophies were not particularly progressive at the time, this says little for Aboriginal education today, a century and a half later when, in many schools, Shelley's words appear to be not yet out-of-date:

Let them be taught reading, writing or religious education, the boys, manual labour, agriculture, mechanic arts etc., the girls sewing, knitting, spinning..."¹⁷

Macquarie's Institution marked the beginning of educational effort amongst Aboriginal people. It was in many ways a commendable effort. In its early years, Macquarie thought it was succeeding. For example, in 1819 about 20 children from the Native Institution competed with about 100 white children from European schools at an annual School Examination. *The Sydney Gazette* reported it this way:

Prizes were prepared for distribution among such as should be found to excel in the early rudiments of education, moral and religious; and it is not less strange than pleasing to remark, in answer to an erroneous opinion which had long prevailed with many, namely, that the aborigines of this country were insusceptible to any mental improvement which could adapt them to the purposes of civilized association, that a black girl of fourteen years of age, between three and four years in school, bore away the chief prize, with much satisfaction to their worthy adjudgers and auditors!¹⁸

Unfortunately, Shelley died in 1820 and when Macquarie left, his successor did not share his enthusiasm for the project nor his belief in the intelligence of Aboriginal people and the Institution lapsed.

The School...is still alive and lingers; but its spirit, with that of its founder, is departed.¹⁹

Perhaps - and only perhaps - if Macquarie had remained, and others like him, the story may have been different, but the early Directors-General of Education in Australia were Church Officials who believed that they had their hands full providing for the settlers' children, let alone attempting the task of educating Aboriginal children.

When, for example, a Royal Instruction was issued on 17th July, 1925, requiring that measures be taken "for the civilization of the Black Natives", Archdeacon Scott, the then Director of Education, responded by saying quite accurately that it would be extremely expensive and that he had been "hitherto quite unable to afford sufficient...scholastic attention to those born of European parents..."²⁰

Scott's point was accepted, and although little, if anything, was being done in Australia towards Aboriginal education, the British Government had a bad conscience about being the aggressors, and having destroyed Aboriginal society without doing anything positive towards "the conversion of the Aborigines...to Christianity and the introduction of civilization amongst them."²¹ Grants of money were therefore made available for this purpose to the various churches. There were many who believed the Aborigines to be sub-human, but also many influential people who did not. One of these was Lord Stanley:

I cannot acquiesce to the theory that they are incapable of improvement...I shall be willing and anxious to co-operate with you in any arrangement for their civilization, which may hold out a fair prospect of success. ²²

Of the early comments by clergy and missionaries, the opinions of those who saw Aborigines only briefly were usually derogatory. For example, "There is no doubt that they are the lowest in the scale of the human race..."²³

However, those who actually worked sincerely among the Aborigines were more often than not impressed with their intelligence and general ability. Gunther, writing of his mission school at Wellington Valley said:

...I am much pleased at the progress they have made, not only in reading the English, but also in Scriptural Knowledge. Some of them would put many European children to shame...they afford at least a decisive proof that they are quite as capable of cultivation of the mind as other nations..."²⁴

There were a number of Mission schools established in New South Wales under the auspices of various churches. What happened to these schools would make a worthwhile study for someone so

inclined. It is probably, in a study of public education, sufficient to say that they failed. Although, in retrospect, much could be criticized in their attitudes and approaches to the education of Aboriginal children, the motives of the churches and teachers were usually motives of the highest order. However, as many of the more thoughtful observers noted at the time, they fought a losing battle against the much greater counter-pressures of convict and settler. The Rev. Dr J.D. Lang put this view most forcefully. After speculating as to what *may* have been the case had New South Wales been settled by what he termed "Europeans of the average character of the inhabitants of Britain", he then went on to say:

If such would have been the condition of the Aborigines...how greatly aggravated must have been the evils of their actual condition, as a race of savages, living in contact with a community of civilized men, when the latter consisted for the most part of the off-scourings of all things; and how rapidly must the progress of the wretched aborigines have been accelerated to moral degradation and utter extinction.²⁵

It is ironic that at the middle of last century, the Select Committee on the Aborigines and the Protectorate concluded that the most beneficial thing for Aboriginal people would be to change the attitudes of the whites, by "promoting the interests of religion and education among the white population of the interior of this Colony," rather than among Aboriginal people.²⁶

But this was an impossible dream, and no such changes were to occur in white attitudes for many years to come. So it was that with the Mission Schools, what was happening to Aboriginal people outside the classroom was so devastating that what went on within it was virtually irrelevant. Any small educational successes were totally eclipsed by the greater tragedy of what Hagan²⁷ described as "the experience of conquest, dispersion and depopulation". The social and physical emasculation of the Aboriginal people of New South Wales began with the first European settlement. It accelerated and spread as farmers and settlers encroached more and more upon tribal lands. Resistance to the land take-over was sporadic in nature, vain in the face of superior European weapons and tragic in terms of the arbitrary reprisals it invited.²⁸ Totally detribalized and demoralized, many Aboriginal people congregated on the fringes of country towns where deaths from pulmonary disease and from imported European diseases such as syphilis

soon outnumbered the killings.^{29,30} It was widely believed by the middle of last century that the Aboriginal race was dying out - a belief that has persisted even into recent times.^{31 32}

EDUCATION FROM 1848 TO 1880 - NO RECOGNITION

Very little can be said about the education of Aboriginal children during this period. A few mission schools struggled on against impossible odds. In 1848 a Board of National Education was set up which was responsible for public education in New South Wales. Very few people at that time believed that Aboriginal children had any right to any form of education, even in those places where they had long ago been forced to abandon their natural life-style and congregate on the fringes of white townships. Reflecting this attitude, the Board's policy was clear and simple: it was impracticable under the circumstances to provide education "for the children of the blacks".³²

From 1867 to 1880, public education in New South Wales was the responsibility of the Council of Education which does not seem to have had a stated policy with regard to Aboriginal children. Although no deliberate attempts were made to school them, it seems that the Council was not actually against the enrolment of Aboriginal children and it would appear that the first Aboriginal child slipped into the Government school system in the early 1870's. By the time the Department of Education ("Public Instruction") was formed in 1880, there may have been as many as 200 Aboriginal children spread throughout New South Wales public schools and, even allowing for the severe decline in population, several thousand not attending any school.³³

FROM 1880 TO 1900 - THE BEGINNINGS OF "PROTECTION" AND SEGREGATION

"Protection" emerged as a Government policy in the 1880's - a policy that was to shape the lives of the Aboriginal people of New South Wales for several generations. At its best, the policy was a charitable gesture based on the premise that "protection" should be provided to "smooth the dying pillow" of the Aboriginal race. At its worst, the policy meant segregation, loss of freedom and the imposition of official control. A Protector of Aborigines was appointed in 1882 (followed in 1909 by the Aborigines Protection Board) with power to establish reserves and to force Aboriginal people to live on them.^{34,35,36} A few reserves were in isolated rural settings, but most were small areas of land on the fringes of country towns where Aboriginal people had already started to

congregate. It is unfortunately not feasible in this paper to deal with general living conditions in these reserves as it is specifically education which is being considered. The financial resources of the Protector were never sufficient to do much for the education of Aboriginal children. Quite rightly, this was seen as the responsibility of the Department of Education.

Until 1882, the Department of Education had no cause to make any official decisions regarding the relatively few Aboriginal children actually attending school. However, the numbers were increasing. In 1883, white parents at Yass objected to the attendance of about 15 Aboriginal children at the public school. George Reid, the Minister for Education responded, opening the way to excluding Aboriginal children from school.

...no child, whatever its creed or colour or circumstances ought to be excluded from a public school. But cases may arise, especially amongst the Aboriginal tribes, where the admission of a child or children may be prejudicial to the whole school.³⁷

The precedent established at Yass was rapidly copied in other schools. The Minister assisted the setting up of separate schools for excluded Aboriginal children. The Protector tried to provide a building of some kind if there was a nearby reserve, and the Department of Education established a provisional school.

The Department of Education did not actively encourage the exclusion of Aboriginal children, and in fairness to George Reid, it should be stated that in cases where the number of Aboriginal children in a school was too few to make an alternative provision viable, his stated policy was that Aboriginal children should attend normal public schools - "provided they are habitually clean, decently clad, and that they conduct themselves with propriety, both in and out of school."³⁸ Unfortunately, this did not take into account the attitude of the local white community towards the attendance of Aboriginal children. Strong protests from white communities became very frequent. Their protest very often took no note of the health or behaviour of the Aboriginal children concerned. Protests were frequently backed up by a demonstration in which the white children were withdrawn from the school.

In a small school, this act threatened its very existence if the number of Aboriginal children remaining was insufficient to keep the school open. Breeza school was a typical example. When

the white children were withdrawn the number of Aboriginal children was so small that the school would certainly have had to be closed if the Aboriginal children had not been expelled and the white children reinstated. In controversial situations like this, the Department saw its first responsibility as being to the white children.³⁹ If an Aboriginal reserve school could be set up for excluded Aboriginal children, it was, but often the number of children was too small to establish even a provisional school, so those excluded children received no education at all.

FROM 1900 TO 1940 - EXCLUSION AND SEGREGATION

By the beginning of the 20th century, several trends were clear. The number of Aboriginal children attending government schools had risen from 200 in 1880 to 600 in 1900, even though the Aboriginal population was still decreasing. The number of Aboriginal schools had increased to 13 to cater for Aboriginal children excluded from normal schools. The New South Wales Department of Education, forced by the pressure of the white community, was moving from a policy of integration to a policy of segregation. The opposition of white parents was even preventing the Department from formulating exclusion regulations which would allow "clean, clad and courteous" Aboriginal children to attend normal public schools. Although the Department's infectious and contagious disease regulations would cover most cases, white parents of the 20th century were just as hostile to integrated schooling as they had been in the 19th century, and would "strike" unless *all* the Aboriginal children were expelled from the school.⁴⁰

It should also be noted that objections were not voiced in all communities, and several schools were well known for their tolerance and helpfulness to Aboriginal children. For example, some senior Aboriginal people to whom the author recently spoke, attended Narrandera Public School and felt welcome around 50 years ago. This contrasting situation is highly significant, because it emphasizes the fact that the *Department's policy on the education of Aboriginal children depended upon the opinions of the local white community.* - and the Department could not guarantee that the local community's motives were honourable, or its attitudes unprejudiced.

The schools where Aboriginal children were accepted were in the minority. During the early 1900's there was a continual stream of Aboriginal schools established, following enrolment crises in local public schools. There were 26 such schools by 1910, but the conditions in them were often very bad indeed. In order to have a

balanced view, it must be said that there *were* some reserves where Aboriginal children were treated fairly humanely, and the existence today of some senior Aboriginal spokesmen, well able to articulate the needs and aspirations of their people, owes much to the few genuinely concerned teachers here and there, including some of the Catholic Sisters and United Aborigines Mission workers, who believed that Aboriginal children had a future. But it is to be regretted that such people appear to have been the exception rather than the rule.⁴¹ Anyone who wants to understand life in that era from the Aboriginal point of view is urged to read Jimmie Barker's own story of his life in North Western New South Wales, 1900-1972.⁴² Regarding education, his memories contrast strangely with the official reports.

From the records of the New South Wales Aborigines' Protection Board concerning the Aboriginal station at Brewarrina in 1911:

To the subjects of reading, writing and arithmetic have been added picture and observation talks....Drill is regularly given. The children are firmly and sympathetically governed.⁴³

From an Education Department report, 1913:

The children are neatly dressed, clean and tidy in appearance. They are well mannered and attentive under instruction and respond to the wishes of the teacher.⁴⁴

From Jimmie Barker's own account of the school at Brewarrina Aboriginal station in 1911-13:

Mr Keogh used a heavy length of bush timber as a cane when we were in school. Outside he always used the stockwhip. He was unmerciful to both boys and girls, sometimes he would lift a child off its feet by the ear, one girl's ear was so badly injured that she had to be sent to hospital.

The vacancy caused by the death of Keogh was filled by a local man named Arnold. He was only an acting manager and we had relief from brutality during this period as he was good to us all, especially the children. Unfortunately

he was only at the mission for a short time.
His successor was Evans.

Mr Evans was a cruel and dishonest man...our teaching was very spasmodic...Evans had little to teach us and punishing children was his main occupation. His favourite weapon was a piece of bush timber about three feet long and two inches in diameter. He was not fussy about how or where he hit us, and after about five hits with this lump of wood a child could be quite badly injured. I have seen boys trying to protect their heads with their hands; he would then hit them in other places and they would fall to the ground with blood streaming from them...The crime the child had committed might have been to smudge his book...

During my first lessons from these men, I learnt that as I was black or partly coloured, there was no place in Australia for me...It gave me the firm idea that an Aboriginal, even if he was only slightly coloured, was mentally and physically inferior to all others. He was the lowest class known in the world, he was little better than an animal; in fact, dogs were sometimes to be preferred. As I was less than twelve years old, it was impossible to disbelieve men of authority who were much older.⁴⁵

Unfortunately, Brewarrina was not an isolated case. Mr William Ferguson of the Aborigines Progressive Association, in giving evidence before the Parliamentary Select Committee enquiring into the Aborigines' Protection Board, said, in 1937, that the station managers, in general, "do not seem to have sympathy for the Aborigine. Their idea is to suppress rather than uplift."⁴⁶

Some senior Aboriginal people on the South Coast of New South Wales have described to the author their vivid memories of the sanitary wagon, laden with its unpleasant load, parked outside their school while the "night-soil" contractor carried out his other job of teaching Aboriginal children.

In most reserves, education was the task of the manager or of his wife and, as Bell has noted -

As well as not having sufficient time to devote to their teaching duties the managers were not equipped educationally for the task. Some were barely literate themselves...Some managers, as the Public Service Board Report on the Aborigines of NSW later indicated, ignored their teaching duties completely.⁴⁷

The actual syllabus provided for Aboriginal schools stressed manual training for life on reserves, with the mere elements of reading, writing and arithmetic. Taught properly, the course of instruction would, at best, have brought the child finally to a standard equivalent to about third class primary.⁴⁸ However, the syllabus itself admitted that most children would not achieve a standard even equivalent to first class, and urged that the pupils be taught "to write their name legibly at the earliest moment".⁴⁹

Aboriginal schools therefore, mostly produced barely literate people, and the number of such schools was still increasing - to 35 in 1920 with well over 1,000 pupils; to 40 by 1940.

In some ways even worse than the inadequate provision in the bulk of the Aboriginal schools were the very many places where Aboriginal children were excluded from the local public school *without* any alternative provision. Twelve children were required to establish a school and if there were fewer their educational needs were ignored. Their needs were also ignored if no building was available, even if there were more than twelve children.

By 1940, the exclusion of Aboriginal children at the request of the white community was virtually the Department of Education's policy.

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Part 2 of this article will appear in Vol.6 No.5.

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