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BOOK REVIEWS :

The Dark People of Bourke: A Study of Planned Social Change, by Max Kamien (Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, Canberra. Humanities Press.

*John Cawte

(Professor Cawte's review is reproduced with permission from the Sydney Morning Herald, where it appeared under the heading - "Good work in Bourke")

Health and adjustment in Aboriginal communities throughout Australia have reached crisis proportions.

Many of these communities suffer from the infectious disease problems of the Third World, the degenerative disease problems of the Western world, and the stress disease problems of the refugee camps. The gap between Aboriginal and Anglo-Australian is so big that we ought to spell it with a capital G.

Since the Gap is measurable in terms of such items as bodily health, consciousness, education, and sanitary engineering - all subjects in which universities are centres of excellence and stimulus - it is proper to ask: what have the universities achieved, in closing the Gap?

Let's not count, for the moment, the streams of technical articles about Aboriginal health and culture, the volumes of reports on the shelf, and the reams of Hansard evidence given to hardworking parliamentary committees. For their numbers, Aborigines must surely be the most studied and pondered group of people in the world. I do not discount that sheer weight of written material is worth something. But until it is, many people think that university studies are a substitute for action.

Let's count, instead, research and development programs initiated by universities in which Aborigines themselves actively participated, which achieved something tangible, and which serve as models (to copy or to avoid, as you decide). The number of such

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programs is not very high. One of the better known ones is The Human Ecology of the Arid Zone Project, initiated in 1968 by the University of NSW.

Although not entirely focused on Aboriginal people, this program is popularly associated with them, and with the district of Bourke. *The Dark People of Bourke* is the third book from this program.

The first was *Australian Rural Practice*, by the late Dr Raphael (Teddy) Coolican, the much-loved doctor of Bourke, and subsequently, of the Royal North Shore Hospital in Sydney. It was published in 1973 by the Australian Medical Publishing Company, and is not as widely read as it should be.

The second was *Children of the Dispossessed*, by Barry Nurcombe, published in 1976 by the University of Hawaii.

The fourth book, now in preparation by Dr Ian Mitchell, concerns those dark people (their own sobriquet) who choose to trans-migrate to more prosperous towns. This book is being prepared in two versions, a technical one and an abecedarian one. It may prove to be the most important of the quartet.

All four books deal with changes which actually happened as the result of planned interventions. Dr Kamien's, the third book, describes in compassionate and clinically accurate words some of the miseries of fine people stranded on the river bank. Dr Kamien (now Professor of General Practice at the University of Western Australia) arrived in Bourke in April, 1970, and practised as family doctor for the Aboriginal people for three years. He soon gained the assistance of leading Aboriginal residents of the town, some genuinely distinguished people, such as Mrs Gladys Ebbsworth, Mrs Gladys Currie, the late Mr Wally Byers, and Pastor Bill Reid. Dr Kamien took early initiatives, but as the Aboriginal Advancement Association gained strength and momentum, he stepped back into a more advisory and consultative role.

Dr Kamien also received good establishment support - this before the days when the Department of Aboriginal Affairs was handed over-arching responsibilities. (Food for thought, there.) Members of the staff of the Bourke District Hospital gave him superlative back-up, even auditing the funds, which came from a grant to me by the Minister for Youth and Community Services. Dr Kamien's salary, a modest one indeed, and his car came through the NSW Institute of Psychiatry in Sydney. A few other funds and many competent people

chipped in; I wish credit could be paid to them. Such people are the hopeful indicators of our society.

When Dr Kamien, a qualified physician and psychiatrist, won enough community acceptance from the Dark People of Bourke he exploited his medical strengths to stimulate the development of self-help and improved social organisation, through an Advancement Association, clubs, co-operatives, adult education and the like. In effect, Dr Kamien asked the community to define its felt needs, then contributed information and encouragement essential to realising those needs. He was in a strategic position, because he was, for the people, *their doctor*.

Readers of this book will see that the road of the family doctor as social change agent, which Dr Kamien explored in Bourke, is a rough one. There is a lot of hostility virus going around. Dr Kamien's antibodies are in good shape, or he would never have survived the virulence.

There was the affair of the tennis tournament. There was the time in 1974 when he was blasted off the front pages of The National Times (The Guinea Pigs of Bourke) for inducing the Bourke baker to fortify the flour with iron and vitamins (the baker stopped fortifying as a result). These attacks, in a paradoxical way, only served to rally local support and he completed his term with the affection, even reverence, which he deserved.

When he left Bourke Dr Kamien really believed that the Aboriginal people were making such progress that he would only need a successor for one more term (of three years) of family doctor-change agent work.

When Dr Kamien kindly asked me to write the foreword to this book, I left out one note because it sounded negative. It was in fact the comment of an eminent Canadian transculturalist who read the manuscript. He asked whether the method of the family doctor as social change agent in Australia were not of limited applicability, if it took a doctor of Dr Kamien's calibre to do the job? I don't know the answer to that.

But I do strongly recommend Australians to read the book in order to grasp the implications of this intervention model. It should come to the attention of other comparably stressed Aboriginal communities, of the Australian public - and of the universities. A lot of them think that community health nurses can adequately do the job, and at less cost.

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