



The Australian Journal of **INDIGENOUS EDUCATION**

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The Australian Outback. Ed. Ian Moffit. Time Life International 1982.

*C. Kenworthy

Time Life International have begun a vigorous telephone marketing program for their new series, *The World's Wild Places*. The first book in the series to be released in Australia is *The Australian Outback*.

A superficial inspection of the book gives the impression that it would be a valuable book for teachers to use in schools. The colour-plate photography in the book is of a high standard. It includes work by Richard Waldendorp, Hal Missingham, Robin Smith, Paul Green-Armytage and other well known photographers.

The bibliography includes classic works by Jeff Carter and Robin Smith on Central Australia; Michael Morcombe on national parks; Laurie Corbett and Lionel Hudson on dingoes and Charles Mountford on Aborigines.

The layout and book production are good. The text is readable and plausible. Despite all this, teachers should be very wary of the book. It contains little that is new in the way of information, and the attitudes and values it purveys are several decades out of date.

Its greatest defect is its treatment of Aborigines who are granted a passing reference in the chapter on dingoes and are elsewhere portrayed as superstitious, stupid or indolent. The reference to the "blackfellow" on page 51 is typical of the white-supremacist attitudes that permeate the text:

One 19th Century (sic!) naturalist described the fate of a luckless blue-tongue skink that found itself without shelter on the Simpson sands. "Having my hands full of specimens" he wrote "I asked a black-fellow to look after it and not let it escape, when to my surprise, he simply put it down on the hot sand. It was perfectly alive when he put it down, having been captured in its hole, and when placed on the

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ground, it began to travel at some rate, but after going some yards its movements became slower and slower, and before ten yards had been traversed, the animal was quite dead - simply apparently baked to death by contact with the hot sand."

It is a nicely chosen quote that illustrates the heat of the Simpson desert, but because no information is given about the language skills or social attitudes of the 'blackfellow', the reader is subtly led to believe that Aborigines are either stupid or hard to get on with.

Ian Moffit did not set out to write a book on Aborigines, but if *The Australian Outback* has room for a long chapter on white explorers grappling with the wild, there should be room for the Aborigines who arrived up to 40,000 years before Leichardt or Burke and Wills.

The section on the Olgas acknowledges Aboriginal tradition, but is essentially dismissive. Ian Moffit writes, after describing the sacred pool at Mutitjilda:

Any momentary sense of reverence we felt disappeared abruptly as a flock of zebra finches buzzed overhead.

The section on the explorers is the most racist. It presents Aborigines as hostile, devious and brutal. No emphasis is placed on the fact that their lands were being invaded. No mention is made of the vast numbers who have been killed by whites who regarded them as little better than wild animals. Their understanding of the land and their spiritual relationships with it is not filled out in any way. The diversity of their culture and the language is ignored.

We are invited to applaud Ernest Giles "who walked 60 miles through the desert with a 50 pound keg of water on his back, knowing that to abandon it was death". And yet, any Aborigine could have found water in that territory. The explorers are presented just as they were in any school text book of the forties or fifties and with the same illustrations. The problems of water shortage, deforestation, soil erosion, desertification, salination which we face now are a result of not learning our lessons from the first inhabitants of this continent who knew how to collaborate with the land, and who did not exploit it.

Teachers should be very wary of any reference book which will entrench the lies of the past, and all Australians should be dismayed that Time Life Books are presenting such a biased view of their country to readers throughout the world.

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The Early Childhood Education of Aboriginal Australians.
Teasdale, G.R. and Whitelaw, A.J., 1981. A.C.E.R., Hawthorn,
Victoria. (176 pages).

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This book describes and analyses six innovative programs of early childhood education for Aboriginal Australian children.

'Placed together' the authors claim, 'it is clear that they have played a very dominant role in shaping the direction of early childhood education provision for Aboriginal Australians since 1967' (p.19)

According to the authors, the year 1967 was a watershed in the education of Aborigines. During the subsequent decade more change took place in basic philosophies, approaches, and provisions than had occurred throughout all the previous years of European settlement. Several factors were involved - the 1967 referendum which, by the greatest majority ever recorded, removed two major discriminatory clauses from the Australian Constitution; changing community attitudes - a realization that Aborigines had not been given a fair go; a growing awareness of the extent to which the education system had failed the Aboriginal people; the influence of the North American compensatory education movement; a series of national seminars; and so on.

For the benefit of non-Australian readers, who cannot be assumed to have any prior knowledge of the origins, history, culture, and present day life-style of Aborigines, the authors provide two introductory chapters in which they consider some of these factors - 'Aboriginal Australians: a Historical Perspective', and 'Educational Provisions for Aboriginal Australians'. Although these chapters are aimed at non-Australian readers, most Australians would do well to read them closely.

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