



The Australian Journal of **INDIGENOUS EDUCATION**

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A Certain Heritage - Programs for and by Aboriginal families in Australia. CRES Monograph 9, by H.C.Coombs, M.M.Brandl and W.E. Snowden. Centre for Resource and Environmental Studies, Australian National University, GPO Box 4, Canberra, ACT 2601.

*Reviewer: Sharman Stone

A Certain Heritage (strange title) is useful, but falls into the category of those books making a definitive statement about all Aboriginal communities or a specific Aboriginal community. It has the usual picture of tattered tots on the front, and it is dedicated to "public servants who seek to understand Aboriginality and accommodate it."

In fact, the book is a report on a three-year study begun in 1979. It is based on inquiry into two traditionally orientated and isolated, small homeland communities. It is not until page 68 that we are warned that "throughout what is written here, the reader must bear in mind that while the Aboriginal values we describe still shape contemporary Aboriginal behaviour, many individuals can and do use alternative guides for action some of which derive from wider Australian society". In 500 pages of analysis and description, this is the only mention of the study's limitations.

The study method is given early in the book, but the level of understanding and real communication with the people is suspect when you read the following observation:

We were often told by teachers or nurses that they did not feel welcome. We have spent some time accounting for this common reaction. (p.57)

After some discussion the writers conclude that:

It is because non-Aborigines are not kin that Aborigines are hesitant about interacting with them." (p.57)

Anyone who is even slightly aware of the anger and grief caused by land loss and the process of the European takeover of Australia realises that there is more to Aboriginal ambivalence than considerations of kinship.

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The information in the book is carefully organised and indexed, ranging widely over matters of values, learning styles, schooling, law and order, health care, nutrition, community economy, consequences of geographic isolation and inappropriate policy.

The information is detailed, but clinically detached. For twenty pages it wanders into an academic discussion on the sociological, anthropological perspectives vis-a-vis socialisation. Throughout it all, I kept hearing the Aboriginal plea for less scrutiny and dissection, and more humanity.

In the Aboriginal newspaper *Koorier 2* (Volume 1, Number 3) a timely warning was made, leavened with humor. In this serious spoof, the European is made out to be the subject of the endless inquiry:

After 7 years of cooperation we fail to see the benefit to us of your research. Rather we see the benefit has accrued to you. You have invaded our bedrooms and made public the things that we have always regarded as private. You have encroached on our land, and forced us to change the way we use our land. Your constant surveys and questioning have made our people confused, disorientated and insecure, and we are even questioning the European values. Yet you still do not understand our way of life and our way of thinking. If you want to continue you must negotiate control of research and researchers, accountability of researchers, and beneficiaries of the research. We also want to discuss futures.

A Certain Heritage has earnest intentions. It is hoped, however, the two communities used to produce the data do, in time, benefit from the study. I would suggest that those wishing to learn more about the needs and desires of Aboriginal families will find more locally relevant and slimmer volumes available. We, at the Aboriginal Education Services, would be happy to guide you to these, including materials written by Aboriginal people themselves.

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