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Book Reviews

My Kind of People: Achievement, Identity and Aboriginality

W. Coolwell

University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1993, ix + 154 pp.

Reviewed by Ian D. Clark

My Kind of People was published in 1993 by University of Queensland Press as part of its Black Australian Writers series. In this modest book of 154 pages, Wayne Coolwell presents interviews with twelve talented Australian people. In his preface, Coolwell states that his aims are to show the diversity that exists in contemporary Aboriginal society and to attempt to challenge non-Aboriginal people's stereotypes. The book is subtitled 'Achievement, Identity and Aboriginality' and these terms capture the essence of the main issues that Coolwell explores with his subjects.

Achievement has been a key criterion for selection in this book, and many of the people included are trail-blazers in their various fields and professions. Wayne Costelloe, for example, was the first Aboriginal Australian Volunteer Abroad; Maroochy Barambah was the first Aboriginal graduate from the Victorian College of the Arts and the first female Aboriginal opera singer to appear professionally on stage; Stan Grant was among the first Aborigines to work as journalists in Australian television; Linda Bonson was the first Aborigine registered in the Bachelor of Arts in Dance degree at the University of Adelaide; Ernie Dingo, in 1988, won the Australian Film Industry best actor award for a television production.

One thing that stands out is the importance of tertiary education in shaping opportunities and outcomes for Aboriginal people. For example, Sandra Eades has a medical degree; Noel Pearson has degrees in history and law; Wayne Costelloe completed a Bachelor of Education and is now studying law and commerce; Stan Grant began an arts degree in history and politics; and Shirley Nirrurranydji has a Bachelor of Arts in Education from Bachelor College.

Coolwell's reasons for his selection of these twelve people, and his exclusion of many other Aboriginal achievers, is never made clear, and it is a pity that he did not articulate his grounds for inclusion more clearly. Age would appear to be a factor, for all twelve interviewed were under forty years of age at the time of their interviews. This excludes many 'achievers' who are worthy of inclusion in a book of this nature. Another unstated criterion appears to be that only achievers who have made their mark within the last few years are interviewed.

Coolwell's aim, to demonstrate the diversity within contemporary Aboriginal society, is achieved by the differences in the histories, life experiences and personal philosophies of his twelve subjects. One way to show this diversity is by profiling briefly the early histories of some of these people: Gordon Bennett was unaware of his Aboriginality until he was an adult, his Aboriginal mother and English father having decided that assimilation was his most appropriate path; Rhoda Roberts was raised by her Bunjalung father, a Church of Christ minister, and her non-Aboriginal mother; Archie Roach was removed from his family and community at Framlingham by welfare officials when he was three years of age.

Many of the twelve people's careers have provided them with the opportunity to travel, to work and/or to perform overseas: opportunities that are denied to many non-Aboriginal Australians, let alone other members of the Aboriginal community. Mark Ella, for example, became coach of Mediolanum rugby union team in Milan, Italy, in 1990; Gordon Bennett spent a year in France where he was in residency after winning the 1991 Moët and Chandon Award for the most outstanding young artist; Sandra Eades worked in Bangladesh and with the Mohawk people in Canada when she was undertaking medical training; Wayne Costelloe has taught at Phuket Island, Thailand; Rhoda Roberts worked for four years in London; and Archie Roach has toured North America.

A strength of this volume of interviews is that it allows us access to the personal philosophies and an understanding of high-profile Aboriginal people. We learn why Yvette Isaacs changed her

name to Maroochy Barambah; why Gordon Bennett attempted to deny his Aboriginality; what motivates Noel Pearson in his work with the Cape York Land Council; Ernie Dingo's views on Aboriginal comedy; Archie Roach's struggle with alcohol; the political insights of Stan Grant; and Shirley Nirrurranydji's views on bicultural education.

In all, this book is a useful addition to the growing literature of Aboriginal biography, and gives us the privilege of understanding more clearly some of the members of the Aboriginal community who through their achievements have attained a high social profile.

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