



The Australian Journal of **INDIGENOUS EDUCATION**

This article was originally published in printed form. The journal began in 1973 and was titled *The Aboriginal Child at School*. In 1996 the journal was transformed to an internationally peer-reviewed publication and renamed *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*.

In 2022 *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education* transitioned to fully Open Access and this article is available for use under the license conditions below.



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, PO Box 1866, Mountain View, CA 94042, USA.

were clearly amenable to the idea of schools and education they were evidently not prepared to cease moving around their country and were frequently unwilling to leave their children behind while they did so.

From the point of view of the white missionaries and educators it was essential that the children stay put in order to facilitate learning. Education thus became one of a suite of reasons why white authorities wanted to stop Aboriginal people moving around. The other reasons included the alarm – warranted or not – that free-ranging Aboriginal people caused to white settlers and the desire of the white authorities to have administrative control over Aborigines, an ambition that could not be realised if they had no way of knowing where these people were at any particular time.

To the extent that Aboriginal people were amenable to the idea of schooling it is reasonable to see this as part of a general interest in and openness to white culture. As elsewhere in Australia, Aboriginal people in the vicinity of Port Phillip seemed open to change and to sampling the products and practices of white settler society. But it would be mistaken to assume they equated this borrowing with a breakdown of the integrity of their own culture. Europeans, for their part, were keen to obtain “Aboriginal products” – by 1840, for instance, Aboriginal people were selling lyrebird feathers, possum and kangaroo skins and baskets in the streets of Melbourne. The fact that children were so readily removed from schools to accompany their families as they moved around the country in itself might be taken to suggest that schooling was seen as peripheral to the core of Aboriginal life at this point in the history of contact. Later in the nineteenth century and in the twentieth century, as “white” education came to be seen as central to participation in the mainstream economy, many Aboriginal people went to great pains to get their children into schools and to keep them there.

The town of Melbourne was obviously an uninvited imposition on Aboriginal country. Once it was there, however, it was contextualised into local Aboriginal culture. The authors note the attraction that “Melbourne held as a place of gaining resources and meeting other Aboriginal people”. The large Aboriginal camps on the fringes of the town and their ability to attract Aboriginal people from far afield made possible the staging of very large corroborees. While the fringe-dwelling life was injurious to Aboriginal health it also enabled particular forms of Aboriginal sociality. Another way of saying this is that the meaning of Melbourne was not immune to Aboriginal appropriation. The Assistant Protector, William Thomas, who had expended significant energy in trying to persuade Aboriginal people to move to the Aboriginal Station at Narre Narre Warren, by 1843 had accepted that they preferred to be close to Melbourne and he began to shift his attention to the possibilities of the Merri Creek site.

In this slim volume, Ian Clark and Toby Heydon have compressed an enormous amount of historical detail on Aboriginal-white relations at this historical “moment” (1841–1851) and have provided us with an unusually fine-grained picture of the cross-cultural landscape. The theme of Aboriginal mobility, noted above, runs through the volume. The authors succeed in conveying the frustration of missionaries like William Thomas who spent so much of their time running around the landscape after their Aboriginal “charges”.

Archaeological investigations at the Merri Creek have failed to find traces of the buildings associated with the Protectorate there. Using historical records, however, Clark and Heydon have pieced together quite a comprehensive picture of the place. They also present a detailed commentary on the operation of the school. This detail includes the names of many of the Aboriginal students, fluctuations in attendance, and the nature of tuition at the school. Particularly interesting is the attention the school received in 1846 in a newspaper debate about the wisdom or otherwise of devoting energy to the education of Aboriginal children whose behaviour and thinking, some commentators believed, was intrinsic, environmentally-determined, and not available to change. On the other hand, it is striking that a meeting of the school’s supporters in Melbourne in 1846 attracted over 600 of the town’s citizens.

A Bend in the Yarra is a valuable, exhaustively researched addition to our understanding of the history of Aboriginal education in Australia.

SEEKING RACIAL JUSTICE: AN INSIDER’S MEMOIR OF THE MOVEMENT FOR ABORIGINAL ADVANCEMENT, 1938–1978

Jack Horner

Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, 2004, xviii+226pp, ISBN 0 85575 468 0

Reviewed by Maryrose Casey

Australian Studies Centre, University of Queensland, Brisbane, Queensland, 4072, Australia

Over the last few decades there has been a slow building of autobiographies and biographies of both black and white activists involved in Indigenous Australian struggles for rights and social justice. Many of these also act as a major contribution to the history of organisations and high profile protest events. The growing list of books includes Margaret Tucker’s, *If everyone cared: Autobiography of Margaret Tucker MBE* (1977); Faith Bandler’s *Turning the tide: A*

personal history of the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders (1989); Joe McGinness', *Son of Alyandabu: My fight for Aboriginal rights* (1991); and Anne Curthoys' *Freedom ride: A freedom rider remembers* (2002).

Individually and collectively these books have the potential to extend the history of the fight for social and political justice with the richer perspective of the individual's experiences, the human details, motivations and costs that are an often untold part of struggles for social justice. Even more importantly within the context of the war over Australian history they put on the record stories that would not otherwise be known except within the social memory of those who were there or who knew people who were there. Each decade's actions are often known only in terms of media representation or, as often as not, non-representation. Without the written record the past is difficult to find.

Jack Horner has made an important contribution to the task of extending the accessible information about Indigenous protest movements and activists in the twentieth century. In 1974, Horner published his study of Bill Ferguson, an Aboriginal activist who in 1937 formed the Aborigines' Progressive Association which sought the abolition of the New South Wales Aborigines Protection Board, *Vote Ferguson for Aboriginal freedom: A biography*. In 1978, he edited Monica Clare's book *Karobran: The story of an Aboriginal girl*. In 1983, he wrote a biographical tribute in the journal *Aboriginal History* to Pearl Gibbs, a major figure in Aboriginal political activism from the late 1920s to the 1970s and one of the organisers with Ferguson of the Day of Mourning protests and conference in 1938. In 1987, with Marcia Langton, Horner published an essay on "The Day of Mourning", in Bill Gammage and Peter Spearritt's, *Australians 1988*. His other contributions include articles on the early days in the Aboriginal/Australian Fellowship and general articles on Indigenous activists in the first half of the twentieth century.

Horner's contribution as a writer has been part of his involvement in the movement for Indigenous Australian's rights. As Jackie Huggins states in the foreword to this book, Horner has been actively involved in the struggle for Indigenous Australian rights since he attended his first Aboriginal-Australian Fellowship meeting in 1957. As a white Australian he was a supporter and active member of a range of early organisations working for social change including the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders (FCAATSI). In this autobiographical work, Horner, as a white Australian, attempts to honestly engage with and share his own journey of self-discovery and examination of deeply held beliefs about Indigenous Australians. Through his reflections on the shifts "well meaning white fellas" had to make from a paternalist support for Indigenous welfare to respect for Indigenous claims and needs,

Horner gives an indication of the distance many white Australians need to travel in order to recognise Indigenous Australians as the original owners of Australia with a continuing sovereignty, connection with the land and an active place within contemporary society and government.

The book is well-structured with evocative titles for sections and chapters. The titles organise the material in a way that facilitates easy referral. The chapters are divided into three sections each titled with the dominant and emerging policies relating to Indigenous Australians at the time; section one is titled "Segregation and Assimilation, 1938–1961", section two "Assimilation and Integration, 1959–1967" and section three "Integration and Self determination, 1968–1978". As well as Horner's text and the foreword by Jackie Huggins, there is an afterword by Gordon Briscoe. This chapter examines the "contradictions of paternalism and reform from 1957–1972" that were inherent in the experiences and actions that Horner recounts in his memoir (p. 192). This article adds to the legislative history post-1972 and contextualises the material from an Indigenous perspective examining the era and its aftermath in a more consciously theorised way.

Horner locates the story of his involvement with Indigenous struggles within his own autobiography, beginning his story with the acknowledgement that he was 35 before he met an Aboriginal Australian (p. 3). Given this relatively late connection in his life with the central focus of the book, Horner contextualises his reminiscences about his own early years growing up in Australia with a brief outline of some of the major events occurring in the same years in the struggle for Indigenous rights. Drawing on his previous biography of Ferguson and other writings, these include descriptions of events such as the Day of Mourning in 1938 and the history of the work of Indigenous activists such as Pearl Gibbs, Ferguson and Bill Onus in the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s and the organisations that developed around their work.

Horner's own political involvement began in 1957 when he attended a public meeting featuring Indigenous and non-Indigenous speakers, organised by the Aboriginal-Australian Fellowship. On the back cover it states that Horner and his wife Jean went to the meeting "simply to find out whether Aboriginal people were discriminated against". In the book it sounds like he was more aware than that, but there is no doubting the strength of his sense of excitement at being at that meeting, the first major public meeting of the Fellowship (pp. 22-23). The "insider" in the title refers to Horner's experiences with Indigenous rights organisations between this first foray in 1957 until he retired from active involvement from his work with FCAATSI in 1973. The text has the dual purpose of also providing a solid introduction to the campaigns and the organisations with which Horner was involved, often in an executive position, during these years.

Given the level of Horner's and his wife Jean's involvement in ongoing campaigns to support Indigenous people suffering abuses under the various Protection Acts, the information is presented with extraordinary humility. Constant trips across the state of New South Wales, meetings with communities and letter writing campaigns and participation in delegations are all told without fanfare. The focus is on the tasks that faced the organisations, particularly FCAATSI. These tasks included the struggle to put together formal evidence to support allegations and the difficulties for middle class white Australians in appreciating the level of intimidation felt by Indigenous people. Horner recounts the attempts by people such as himself to discover the extent of the racial oppression of Indigenous Australians and to influence changes of policies. At the same time, with a sense of regret, he acknowledges the failure of the "well meaning whitefellas" to recognise serious problems that the Indigenous people were facing such as the removal of children (p. 47).

Horner's understated style of storytelling gives rich glimpses of the process of discovering a "new world" and his attitudes at the time. In the second chapter titled "A crash course in Aboriginal affairs, 1957-58", Horner tells the story of going to Tingha in the late 1950s to "meet Aboriginal people" (pp. 44-45). When they arrived in the town the local white man who had invited them to visit volunteered to take Jack and Jean Horner to meet people. As they were driving along in his truck they "spotted an Aboriginal woman driving a sulky who had been shopping with her small child", so they followed her home to where she lived on the old reserve. After knocking on her door and identifying himself he discovered she was guarded in her conversation with him about the police and the Aboriginal Welfare Board. Horner observes: "Clearly, even though I was representing an Aboriginal support group I was still distrusted as a gubba (white man)" (p. 45). While he was concerned about the isolation of her home, she wanted him gone. She told him she had work to do and suggested he go and talk to a woman who lived in the town (p. 45).

The style of the accounts of conferences that constitute a substantial part of the book from Chapter 4 onwards suggests at times that the writing is often based on minutes and reports from meetings. However, despite an occasional sense of reading summaries of minutes, throughout the text there is a strong sense of Horner's gradual transition from unquestioned support for assimilation to a position where, though still resisting, he can begin to hear what Indigenous people were saying and calling for. In his gentle story-telling style, Horner paints a picture of himself as initially dedicated to assimilation and constantly surprised by Indigenous people's unexpected resistance to its possibilities. He also reveals the assumptions members of the Fellowship had about the

social connections of Indigenous Australians living in urban areas. He writes of assuming that all Aboriginal people knew each other and his lack of awareness of different cultural groupings (p. 49). Progressively through the book he notes moments where he or other white supporters must acknowledge the words and demands of Indigenous people. Though there is not a great deal of personal detail, or because there is not that detail, when Horner adds personal descriptions such as Whitlam's voice registering a change of thinking during a debate at a conference in 1960, the voice of Horner as witness carries authority.

The choice of the cover photo taken at a demonstration and featuring a large banner that reads "Black Control of Black Affairs" vocalises the tension at the heart of the book. Horner was, as he styles himself, a "well meaning white fella" and the book reveals the subtle layers that Indigenous activists had to contest and negotiate in order to gain control of Indigenous support organisations. The title of the chapters and the sections such as Chapter 4 "Learning to listen to Aboriginal aspirations, 1959-61" clearly locates the power at the time in the hands of the white members. The institution of closed all-Aboriginal sessions that became an integral part of the Federal Council for Aboriginal Advancement (FCAA, later FCAATSI) marks the beginning for the white members of a sense of ambivalence, a difficulty in letting go, of control of Aboriginal support organisations. It also marked the shift in policies of the FCAA from supporting assimilation. It is interesting how quickly the direction of the FCAA organisation begins to change once Indigenous delegates gain more power at the conference and in the organisation, first supporting land rights then opening up membership and voting rights to all Aboriginal organisations.

The text is described as part history, part memoir, this is a distinction that in some ways undersells what the book offers. The history is strongly present in the personal reminiscences. Horner's account reveals a sense of alienation at times, the process of "discovery", and the journey of learning that paternalism is not an improvement and that Australia is not a white country. Horner has been acknowledged as a courageous man by many Indigenous activists with whom he has worked over the years. The honesty and humility with which this book is written, revealing a man who struggles with changing his views and expectations, proves how true those tributes are.