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UNCOMMON GROUND: WHITE WOMEN IN ABORIGINAL HISTORY

Anna Cole, Victoria Haskins & Fiona Paisley (Eds.)
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The ground this collection of essays treads is indeed uncommon, and the pilgrim feet that tread it need to be more visible. It is undoubtedly a factor that the subjects are women and that much dominant culture history is for and by men. Aboriginal women are even more likely to be overlooked, gender protocols being what they are in Aboriginal cultures. What is most exciting about the focus in this book is the documentation of tentative and sometimes feisty crossings, even breachings, of cultural and race "divides". European Australians and also perhaps those parts of Aboriginal Australia who have needed to separate from the dominant culture need to be encouraged and reassured by such narratives, but sometimes the relationships elicit cautions.

The significance of this book is that it documents life in the transcultural zone and invites all manner of ethical and cognitive questionings and probings. The editors take courage from Carole Ferrier's dictum that "[t]he problems of speaking about people who have been constructed in the dominant discourse as "other" cannot ... be a pretext for not doing so" (p. xv) and the contributors do so in ways that acknowledge how disempowering White structures of authority have been for Aboriginal people, and especially women. It is a book that belongs to that class of scholarship which documents some of the subtleties of negotiations over culture, which does not seek to homogenise either Aboriginal people or Whites, and which recognises the diversities of roles played by both. Many of the essays are alive to the ways in which power relations are both personal and structural, and the essays often show Indigenous women seeking to make use of the unequal power distribution by strategic alliances with White women to achieve their own ends. And White women acting in the spirit of noblesse oblige, willingly putting their educational advantages at the service of Indigenous women in order to ameliorate injustices on the personal as well as systemic levels. It also explores how very uncomfortable the consciousness of racial inequality was for some thinking women who

enjoyed uneasily the privileges of belonging to the dominant culture.

The preface is intelligent in the ways it frames its subjects and enunciates the historiographical methodology of the collection. It is upfront in its concerns with the thorny issue of White women working ethically in a domain where current and former practitioners have worked not as colleagues but as mistresses/subalterns, and have been imbricated in a colonialist culture. These editors have learned valuable lessons from the past and from postcolonial theorists/practitioners like Spivak and Haggis. Another methodology, one adopted from feminist theory and perhaps the postmodern critique of power, is their identification of their own experiences of race and class.

The essays which most elicited excitement in me were Alison Holland's account of Mary Montgomery Bennett, who, between the wars in collaboration with Indigenous Aboriginal women activists, pursued an anti-polygamy policy. Like many feminists before her (indeed since the seventeenth century), Bennett's intellectual commitment was inspired by feminist agendas deriving from opposition to slavery, to child marriage and to prostitution. Before her maturity, her own upbringing as a child of empire on a remote grazing property in Queensland was also a factor in her pro-Indigenous activism in that Aboriginal women and children were part of her life. Her double-pronged accusations are of great interest: in expressing doubt about traditional practices of polygamy and child marriage, she was also targeting the ways in which such practices cleared the ground for, indeed were used to justify, unscrupulous White male exploitation of Indigenous girls and a system of barter and trade in girls with the Old Men (often for necessities of life in the form of rations) to whom they had been promised. Bennett was also concerned with how vulnerable such practices left mothers and girls to being taken into state custody, and also to contracting STDs. Holland's analysis is astute and nuanced: while aware of the contradiction in Bennett's position and her imperial positioning (in particular her lack of understanding of how Indigenous marriage practices were inextricably linked to land tenure systems and to the integrity of the Aboriginal cultures she aimed to protect), she appreciates the usefulness of her articulating a position that was so uncomfortable for government that it was easier not to hear it. Her Christian and humanitarian activism did argue strongly the humanitarian need for colonised women who had experienced sexual exploitation by White men to be considered as full human beings in an era when such matters were hidden or not on the agenda. She was not the prissy kind of European who was too polite to talk openly about prostitution on the frontier. She enabled Indigenous women in the Margaret River area to live on country with their

wider families and avoid the anti-family policies of Moore River, and to choose partners at the same time as avoiding the kind of White man who would exchange them for groceries.

Another astonishing and dissident member of the colonial bureaucracy who worked with Aboriginal women and even against her own husband, the local policeman, was the leprosy specialist nurse Ruth Heathcock in the Roper Bar area of the Northern Territory. It is a tale of conspiracy and a healing camp, concealed but close to the police station, occurring under the unknowing nose of a law-abiding and law-enforcing husband. Karen Hughes gives a moving account of the heroics of the most well-known event in her life, retelling the story of her failed rescue of Horace Foster who had accidentally shot himself at Manangoora in 1951. This mission entailed a journey of 180km during a bad wet season in dugouts along a crocodile-infested coastline. But the main claim Hughes makes for Heathcock is not this dramatic event, but rather her more long-term challenge to the inhumane leprosy laws and her collaboration with Indigenous people to find lateral solutions to them which enabled sufferers to remain near family and on country. What Heathcock realised was that the laws designed to prevent the spread of leprosy were in fact so draconian that they encouraged escapees returning to family and country, and also secreting people in the bush who remained untreated. Heathcock was aware that her nursing success was unthinkable without the mentorship and collaboration of skin-grandmother Norah Wonamgai, an Elder and Law Woman. I'd have liked to have seen much more detail and evidence on which the claims made about this relationship were based and their incorporation into non-restricted element of the Kunapipi mythology, but perhaps these will emerge in the forthcoming book on Heathcock that Hughes is writing. What is clear is a mutual and complementary co-option of Dreaming and medical paradigms, a generative genuinely postcolonial hybrid moment. Ruth was forcibly evacuated from Borroloola during the war, and lost not only her patients and cross-cultural contacts, but also her vocation as a specialist nurse with knowledge of Indigenous culture. The war also made a widow of her: her husband Ted, whom she eventually co-opted to resist the removal of patients with leprosy from country, was killed during the war. This conjugal team remain among the heroes in the Yanyuwa pantheon for their dedication to service and their cultural relativism. Colonialism throws up its egalitarians.

The most astonishing essay of all to me was that concerning the 60 year career of activist, Pearl Gibbs Gambanyi, from Brewarrina. If what Stephanie Gilbert claims for her is true, as the grandmother of decades of Indigenous activists (including Charles Perkins, Faith Bandler, Doug Nicholls and legions of others), she should be classed as a national treasure and her

historical obscurity reassessed. A feisty woman with some education at the hands of the Sisters of Mercy in Yass, she became involved in protests over working conditions and strikes (and later associated with members of the Communist Party); she investigated allegations of sexual abuse in home dormitories; was a founding member of the Aborigines Progressive Association, the peak body for Aboriginal Rights from 1937; organised the original Day of Mourning for the sesqui-centenary in 1938; and was the first Indigenous woman to speak on radio in 1941. She was by any measure a great woman who got under the skins of many, and her productive activist life is not easily predicted on the basis of her class, colour or opportunities, but she clearly bestrode those like a colossus.

There are a raft of fascinating essays on mainly middle class women (like Constance Ternent Cooke, Catherine Martin, Elizabeth McKenzie Hatton, Joan Kingsley Strack) who worked politically or used the pen to achieve a more equitable world for Aboriginal women, a job that is of course ongoing. These good works may have been motivated by cultural shame, perhaps even emanating from the need to critique patriarchal abuse within their own families (as Margaret Allen suggests of Catherine Martin), or their own churches (as John Maynard tells of Hatton who came into dispute with Retta Dixon Long's Aboriginal Inland Mission on the issue of child separation).

Daisy Bates could not be left out of such a collection but she gets more airplay than she perhaps deserves in this volume, and the two essays by Cynthia Coyne and Jim Anderson (one of two welcome male contributors) are very different in approach. Jim Anderson covers quite well-known territory of Bates's eccentricity, self-delusion and social Darwinism in matters of race. His original contribution to the debate is to see her as a border-crosser: from her Irish roots to anti-Irishness and anti-Catholicism; from respectability to bigamy and the abandonment of her only child; and the gentlewoman/nomad divide which she straddled until her unremarkable death in a suburban old folks home in Adelaide. Masquerade, and in particular the role of "revered grandmother of ancient tribes" (p. 226) and appropriation were her *métier*, and Anderson casts doubt on the extent to which the books that bear her name were in fact the work of Ernestine Hill.

Although Cynthia Coyne registers the debates that surround Daisy Bates, she speaks as a Jukun-Yawuru clan member about the usefulness of Bates's collaboration with the artist Billinge, a Law Man with strong links into many cultures in the Broome area, which resulted in the recording of the material culture and language of those nations in a medium that is distinctly Western – another hybrid moment. She argues the multifunctionality of these artefacts: their use for ethnographical archives, for language

preservation, but also as art objects, a perspective that was not admitted in Bates's own time and that belongs to a later era of discourses of Aboriginal art. She raises interesting questions about the graphic intertexts to which he may have been exposed, or whether Bates herself taught him to draw in the style he chose. Coyne is in a position to correct Bates's misunderstandings about culturally exclusive artefacts and the meanings of words, to hazard explanations of ambiguously and curiously juxtaposed items, and to herself learn her culture from these decades-old documents through a process of intergenerational exchange. She has no doubt that Billinge was the agent of affirmation of his culture and using Bates, rather than merely the object of Bates's patronage.

Francesca Cubillo is perhaps kinder to Elizabeth Durack, another border-crosser, than she needs to be for her invention of Eddie Burrup. What emerges from this narrative is the imbrication of Aboriginal art dealer and daughter, Perpetua Durack Clancy, in a deliberate attempt on Elizabeth's part to pass as an Aboriginal artist. Not only did she paint using this persona, rationalising the process as "another avenue to express her artistic self", but she also invented transcripts of interviews with "Burrup" in Kriol. To have engaged in this sustained act of deception over several decades is to have entrenched the Durack family's distortion of the reality of violence on the Kimberley frontier, and earlier in the Channel Country over four generations of that dynasty. The Durack and Costello properties may have been safer havens than their neighbours', but a close reading of *Kings in grass castles* (Constable, 1959) (which invents its own pioneer mythos which is still too often not questioned insistently enough) makes clear the kinds of instrumentalism in Patsy Durack, the patriarch's dealings with such retainers as Boxer and Pumpkin, that sullied their paternalistic, indeed feudalistic, relationships with their employees. Their homestead, after all, was used by the police and neighbours as the base for what Mary Durack calls, chillingly, the "inevitable punitive expeditions" waged against such "untamed" Aborigines as Jandawarra during a very violent period in the Kimberleys (1890s). Further, Elizabeth's earliest work illustrating stories for children, published in the 1940s, eloquently testifies to her sense of the Aboriginal world as quaint, cute, exotic. It is embarrassingly patronising, demeaning and trivialising.

Two articles on the institutions caring for Aboriginal girls which invite comparison are the compassionate article by Christine Brett Vickers on her grandmother, Jennie Parsons Smith, who did the legwork at the Singleton Aboriginal Children's Home and many another AIM home, and a more hostile piece by Anna Cole on Ella Hiscocks who ran the Cootamundra Home for Aboriginal Girls for 20 years from 1945. Between them, but not deliberately, these articles map, as Vickers pungently notes, a shift from church-

based philanthropy to state-ordained surveillance and control, which she identifies as occurring between 1910 and 1920 in Australia. Jennie Parsons Smith, an orphan herself, was a lower class woman who looked after her numerous Aboriginal charges alongside her own children and who placed a high value on education and not only for her own children. She saw it as her job to instil self-pride in the children in her care. Not only did she and her children engage in the seriously heavy work of running homes, but she had reason to be thankful for her close and egalitarian relationship with Ngarrindjeri people at Manunka: twice her children were rescued from drowning when she was "distracted by work and babies" (p. 37), and once when floods prevented her from birthing in a hospital and her close friend "Black Jennie" Christmas delivered the child. Jennie's approach to teaching Christianity was more flexible than one associates with missionary endeavour, and focused on the "universality of human experience". The story has a tragic ending, however, with husband George not making the transition to state-sponsored paternalism. Because of his outspoken criticism of sending a boy into service which he deemed child slavery at age 12, he lost his job.

Anna Cole argues that under the state-sponsored system, "protection" gave way to a brutal regime of assimilationist agendas, marked by a full panoply of techniques of surveillance and control. The tone of this critical piece is struck when we are informed that the new Chairman of the Aborigines Welfare Board in 1909 had written a book entitled *Breeding and management of livestock*. Cole tells a narrative in which Ella is both complicit with the system and a defender of it by instilling self-loathing in the girls, and also simultaneously and contradictorily, a victim of systemic shortcomings – having to fight for adequate clothing and food for the children, and for treats like participation in sporting events. The essay is an eloquent exemplification of the contradictions at the heart of essentialist and patronising colonialist practice.

Whatever the motivation or sectarian affiliations, what emerges is a picture of women taking initiatives, risking opprobrium and censorship, asking tough questions on sensitive and taboo topics, and intervening in cultural debates long before they were mainstream and little by little, effecting often in league with Aboriginal women, the climate in which change could occur. This is a fascinating book which repays the investment of time many times over. Its stories will stay in memory and its analyses are thought-provoking.