



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*.

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CHERBOURG STATE SCHOOL *in* HISTORICAL CONTEXT

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■ Abstract

Cherbourg State School is some 300 kilometres northwest of Brisbane. It is situated in an Aboriginal community at Cherbourg with approximately 250 students, all of whom are Indigenous Australian children. Cherbourg State School aims to generate good academic outcomes for its students from kindergarten to Year 7 and nurture a strong and positive sense of what it means to be Aboriginal in today's society. In a context where the community continues to grapple with many social issues born of the historical processes of dispossession and disempowerment, Cherbourg State School is determined that its children can and will learn to become "Strong and Smart". It is a journey that has been charted by Chris Sarra, the school's first Aboriginal principal, in his paper *Young and Black and Deadly: Strategies for Improving Outcomes for Indigenous Students* (2003), which describes how pride and expectations were engendered in the school over a four-year period from 1998. In this paper I will discuss the historical context of the school and its impact on the Indigenous people of Cherbourg. My aim here has been to consider the historical, political, social and cultural context around the creation of Cherbourg State School. I critically examine the historical records of the role of the State Government and the white settlers in the setting up and creation of the Aboriginal Reserve and later the primary school. Throughout I address an absence – a voice missing from history – the voice of the Aboriginal people. This exercise in collective memory was designed to provide an opportunity for those who have seldom been given the opportunity to tell their story. Instead of the official view of Cherbourg School it provides a narrative which restores the victims of history to a place of dignity and indeed humanity.

■ Prologue

Mein Flügel ist zum Schwung bereit,
Ich kehrte gern zurück,
Denn blieb ich auch lebendige Zeit,
Ich hätte wenig Glück
(Gerherd Scholem, "Gruss vom Angelus")

My wing is ready for flight,
I would like to turn back.
If I stayed timeless time,
I would have little luck.

A Klee painting named "Angelus Novus" shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing in from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such a violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress (Benjamin, 1979, p. 259).

In this paper, I consider the historical, political, social and cultural context around the creation of Cherbourg State School. I approach this task as an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander woman. Chris Sarra and Mudrooroo Narogin note the importance of locating such a task within the confines of academic rigour, but not at the expense of Indigenous and holistic approaches to the literature (Narogin, 1990, p. 170; Sarra, 2005, p. 2). Accordingly it is necessary to provide the reader with my personal context to enable the entire story I present to be located in its context.

Born in Townsville, I am of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander heritage and the eldest of five children. My mother is of Aboriginal (Birrigubba) and South Sea Islander descent; my grandmother was an Aboriginal (Kalkadoon) and South Sea Islander woman and my grandfather was an Aboriginal man (Birrigubba). My father is of Torres Strait Islander heritage from

the Central Islands (Mauar) in the Torres Strait; my grandmother was from the Eastern Islands and my grandfather was from the Central and Niwi Islands.

Growing up in a very large extended family and being fortunate to have both Indigenous cultures running through my veins makes me very proud to acknowledge my Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander heritage. In all my years from a child to an adult I was always taught to be proud of who I was and never to be ashamed or to let anyone put me down. This was something that was instilled from a very young age in all of us – my brothers, sisters, parents, cousins, uncles, aunties and grandparents.

My grandfather, who was a descendant of the Birrigubba tribe, was a strong-willed man who wanted to share with others the culture that he loved and respected, despite his painful upbringing as an Aboriginal man living under the Act on Palm Island. This love was passed on in turn to my generation, not only by my mother and her family but also by others who had respected and honoured the hard work my grandfather had put in fighting for justice and freedom for our people.

My father who is of Torres Strait Islander heritage is not only a great man in my eyes and in my heart but is a respected traditional healer. Throughout my life my father has always been there not only for his own children and family but also for others within the community who needed his help. Traditional healing in our family is something that is part of our life; it has saved lives and will continue to do so as it is passed on from one generation to the next.

My mother too has been a great role model and an inspiration to me, not only as a caring and loving mother but also in her role as a District Community Education Counsellor in the Northern region. For over 25 years as a counsellor she has had the opportunity to work with and assist the community and Indigenous students to improve their educational outcomes. She is also a strong advocate for eradicating the numerous inequities that exist for Indigenous people in today's society.

My upbringing in both Indigenous worlds has given me knowledge, pride and respect for the wonderful cultures of our people. It has instilled a strong sense of Aboriginal identity and Torres Strait Islander identity that makes me the person that I am and is something that I now pass on to my children. As an educator I also have the opportunity to share the cultures of my people with other Indigenous and non-Indigenous children.

As I sit and reflect on my experiences as a teenager, attending a high school within a mainstream system, it is interesting to note the perceptions and attitudes I felt that my peers and my teachers had about being an Aboriginal or a Torres Strait Islander person. I recall times when my Indigenous peers would think I was "too flash" or "a coconut" because I would not wag

school or classes, or because I would hang out at times with my non-Indigenous friends and not with them.

I recall an incident from my final year at high school, with one of my teachers who taught me English, that is as clear to me now as it was the day it happened. It was the last few weeks of school, when students are thinking about their future and what they might do when they leave school. It was also the time when you asked your teachers for references to help you secure some steady work. My student friend who was non-Indigenous asked this particular teacher for a reference: a request that the teacher had no trouble in responding to with a quick and smiling "Yes". However, a few days later when I decided to ask for one, the response was "No, I don't give them out".

This negative experience happened over 20 years ago, but is something that I have never forgotten. I have always asked myself, "Was it because I wasn't good enough?" (knowing that my marks were about the same as my colleague's) or "was it because I was black?" I suppose now I really knew all along that it had nothing to do with knowledge and more to do with the negative perception and attitude that this teacher in particular had of what an Indigenous person should be. When I look back now, I can see how I turned this ugly negative experience into something that made me determined to succeed, not only for myself but also for other Indigenous people who have experienced similar misfortunes. Applying for entry into the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Tertiary Education Program at James Cook University was the start of my rewarding adventures and various working quests to make something of myself, and to enable me to do something close to my heart – to help fight for Indigenous people against discrimination and injustice.

In what follows I will critically examine the historical record, the Queensland State Government and the white settlers in developing and maintaining the Aboriginal Reserve and later the primary school. Firstly, however, it is necessary to address what is an obvious void – a voice that is missing from history. That voice is of course the voice of the Aboriginal people. On approaching such a crucial task I would like to acknowledge initially that, not unlike Walter Benjamin's *Angel of History* quoted at the beginning of this paper, I wish to resist the pull of the future in the present. The will to resist comes from my standpoint within what John Berger (1979) has termed a "culture of survival". He contrasts this with the "culture of progress" that most white Australians would belong to. For those within the culture of progress, history is either "bunk", as Henry Ford termed it, or a seamless narrative chronicling the success of the superior white race as the almost divinely ordained end of history, as related in Raphael Cilento's *Triumph in the Tropics* (Cilento & Lack, 1959).

Rather than succumbing to the narrative of progress, I would like to stay and awaken the dead. I would like

to make clear however that in so doing I reject the argument implicit within Nietzsche's aphorism:

By searching out origins, one becomes a crab. The historian looks backward, eventually he also *believes* backward (Nietzsche, cited in Kaufmann, 1978, p. 470, original emphasis).

Contra Nietzsche, I would affirm that to remember the past is not to indulge in "a sick passion" that would prevent us from acting, but is rather to lay the basis for the just society.

Implicit within this view is, of course, a judgement of the past as a time of injustice. Here Nietzsche explicitly railed against the very act of judging the past. He wrote:

Who compels you to judge? If it is your wish – you must prove first that you are capable of justice. As judges you must stand higher than that which is to be judged; as it is, you have only come later. The guests that come last to the table should rightly take the last places; and you will take the first? Then do some great and mighty deed – the place must be prepared for you then, even though you do come last (Nietzsche, 1957, p. 40).

In reply to this I would assert that the need to judge the past springs from a recognition of its efficacy in the present. It is not that I and other Indigenous people stand higher; indeed, as I have endeavoured to show in my own personal narrative, we are very far from being "high" in this land. Yet we are by no means the last to arrive; indeed we were here some 40, 000 years before the first white men and women.

As for the great deed that Nietzsche demands before we have a right to judge the past, I would suggest the act of survival by Indigenous Australians has been such a feat. Moreover, it is precisely because we have survived that we are able to interrogate the past and to point out that we have been victims of what Hegel termed the "slaughter bench of history". Hegel, unlike Walter Benjamin, sought to relate the narrative of history as one of progress. He was, admittedly, somewhat uneasy about individuals being sacrificed to "the empire of chance". Nevertheless he insisted that beneath the slaughter the "cunning of reason" was at work (Hegel, 1991, p. 33).

However I want, like the theologian Edith Wyschogrod, to remember the "dead others" (Wyschogrod, 1998, p. 3). For Hegel, this would presumably mean that I have joined in what he derisively termed the "Litany of Lamentations" (Hegel, 1991, p. 34). Be that as it may, it was a central motivation behind the production of my project to place on record the feelings of some of the Aboriginal students and former students of Cherbourg State School, while it was still possible. It is impossible for me to undo what these former students

experienced, but at least I can ensure that they do not vanish from history.

I am very aware, as I write these words on the importance of history, of the debate that is now going on – a debate that has been dubbed the "History Wars" (MacIntyre & Clarke, 2003; Manne, 2001; Windschuttle, 2001, 2003, 2004). The debate itself ranges from attacks on and defences of professional historians, such as Manning Clark and Geoffrey Blainey, to the narrative of white-black relations from colonial times to the present (MacIntyre & Clarke, 2003). At the heart of the debate is the question of how to portray Australian history – as progress or decline?

This is not at all an insignificant question, as can be seen from the 1997 National Inquiry into the separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families (HREOC, 1997). There, the view that prevailed was that the history of Indigenous Australians is to be seen as one of decline. Following the report, the question arose then of responsibility and what should be done as recompense. The resultant controversy came to be known as the "Sorry Debate", in which Indigenous Australians demanded an apology from the Federal government for the past treatment of the First Peoples in this land. No apology was forthcoming until February 2008 when Prime Minister Kevin Rudd offered a national apology to Indigenous Australian people. The former Prime Minister, John Howard was dismissive of the very concept, saying:

I have never supported the notion of a formal apology, because I have never believed that the present generation of Australians should be forced to accept responsibility for what happened in earlier times, for which they were not directly responsible (Howard, cited in Edmund Rice Centre, 2000).

I am, of course, as an Indigenous person, vitally interested in this controversy. The stakes are high for the First Peoples of this land. But my purpose in this paper is not so much to contribute to public controversy, but rather to help develop an understanding of the trajectory of Cherbourg State School within the context of Aboriginal education.

How might we do this? For, what is admittedly only a partial answer let us go to the archives. Let us make this a "time-machine trip" – let our imagination take us into the past. As the historian Eric Hobsbawm has pointed out, writing history for the historian:

... requires an effort of the imagination, a willingness to suspend beliefs based on his or her own life experience, and a lot of hard research work (Hobsbawm, 1997, p. 307).

It is May 1906 Dr Walter Roth, newly appointed Chief Protector of Aborigines has left Brisbane at 8.00 am. He

tells us he arrives in Murgon later that day at 8.10 pm. The next day he heads for the Aboriginal Settlement. On the road he meets a group of Aborigines. We are told they were:

... a native named "Bob", and a half-caste [sic] named "August King" and his wife, known formerly as "Ruby Wall", on their way to the settlement. "Ruby Wall" was sent to the settlement on the Minister's Order, and by Section 9 of the 1905 regulation she must not leave the Settlement without the Minister's permission in writing. "Bob" said he had been working on Mr. Tronson's Selection falling scrub, and gave me the names of eight others there... "King" said he had been working on the selection, helping to build a house and a barn, and was then making a pigsty. He said he had been there for about three months, but had not yet received any payment (Roth, 1906, p. 1).

At this moment – just as we are beginning to wonder what it might be like to have one's movements controlled by a ministerial order, or to work for three months without pay – Bob, August King and Ruby Wall vanish from history. We are told nothing about them in the rest of the report. More importantly however, for my purposes, there is no record of what they thought about the meeting with the white men. We do not know what they thought it was like, to meet the man of power on the road and to be interrogated about their lives, without having the power to ask him what he was doing there. Nor do we know what Ruby felt about being moved to the Settlement and being confined there by the Minister's order. Further, we do not know what Bob and his friends would have thought about the quotation marks that Roth places around their names. Would they have understood that it indicates that their status in the white world was regarded, at best, as below that of a citizen? In all probability Bob and the others would have been illiterate, and so what Dr Roth was to write about them would have remained a mystery. Yet can anyone honestly doubt that they would have understood that Roth was the master and they were the slaves?

However, to answer these questions fully and to restore Bob, Ruby and August King properly to history would require a further act of imagination, which lies outside the scope of this paper. Nevertheless, as an Aboriginal person, I would like to emphasise once more, the absence of any Indigenous voice in the early and indeed much of the late history of the Cherbourg School. Few if any experts and bureaucrats who wrote and plotted and planned for the Indigenous people of this land ever thought to ask the Aborigine what she or he thought or wanted. I would also like to record here my strong objection to accepting only the white voice as the source of evidence. A classic instance of this

technique is Keith Windschuttle's use of the absence of reference to territoriality in the Robinson diaries to support his assertion that Aborigines had no concept of land ownership (Windschuttle, 2001, p. 3).

As I have already indicated, I include where possible some Aboriginal accounts of their experience of schooling at Cherbourg. These accounts are largely from the school in the 1950s and 1960s, after, as we will see, the school was integrated for the first time into the State Education system. For the earlier history of the school I have to rely largely on the official record. However, although I chafe at the absence of an Indigenous voice, I am to some extent content here to let the record speak for itself, since I am convinced that a simple reading of the archives is indeed more than sufficient to establish beyond reasonable doubt that for most of its history Cherbourg State School was part of a system, "Aboriginal education", which was, as McConaghy has shown, never designed to educate (McConaghy, 2000). How this situation came about can be established by examining what the players with power said about their intentions in setting up the Cherbourg School.

■ Attitudes of the wider community towards Aborigines

Before doing this, however, I would like to set those same intentions and attitudes in a wider context. The establishment and subsequent trajectory of the Cherbourg School cannot be understood without a knowledge of the wider scene within which the school was expected to operate. Specifically I want to ask: how did mainstream Australia view the Aborigines at Cherbourg? Blake argues strongly that the primary purpose in setting up the reserve system was to control the Aborigine. The possibility of being sent away to a reserve was a strong deterrent, and a weapon in the armoury of those who sought control over the Indigenous population (Blake, 2001, pp. 37-39).

Here a deep concern was with the need to "keep the white race pure". There are innumerable expressions of this in the literature and one would think that with the publication of Rosalind Kidd's *The Way We Civilise*, the matter was beyond controversy (Kidd, 1997). However, the current historical debates initiated by Keith Windschuttle have meant that one does indeed need to go to the historical record to establish beyond doubt the racist nature of the basis underlying the relationship between white and black Australians (Windschuttle, 2001).

A good way to begin is to return to Dr Walter D. Roth, the Chief Protector, whom we have already met in this paper. Reporting on his first visit to Cherbourg, Roth expressed the following concern:

There are four quadron female children on the settlement of about 8, 9, 11 and 13 years, respectively. They are attending the school, but

of course are living in the camp. It would be a good act if they were removed to a "white" orphanage as suggested in your report to the Minister some time ago. Personally I consider the leaving of quadroons in blacks' camps is the greatest blot which could be placed on an administration aiming at the protection of the aboriginal race. The ultimate end of the Aboriginal race is that they will become half castes etc. and should not this *racial waste* be checked by rescuing the quadroons etc (Roth, 1906, p. 9, emphasis added).

What is clear in this instance is that Roth, although a liberal man in comparison to those who were to follow him on his retirement in 1906, sees the end of the Aboriginal race as a real possibility (Kidd, 1997, p. 58). His primary concern remains, though, with the protection of white blood. Thus his belief is that for "quadroons" to live and cohabit with other blacks involves the danger of wasting the precious white "blood".

Attitudes such as Roth's towards "blood" were if anything to become more pronounced in the 1930s. These concerns became, indeed, quite critical after the Governor, Sir Leslie Wilson, visited Cherbourg in 1934. His report on his tour raised the spectre of interracial relations; specifically the Governor was extremely worried about "blood". He wrote to the Deputy Premier, Percy Pease:

Unfortunately, the increase in numbers is not due to births of full blood natives, but of half-castes, and this point is of great importance in the future. Many of the girls are sent out to stations or farms as helps, and that 95% of them return to the settlement, either about to have a child, or who have had a child, the father of which is a white man. I, myself, saw many young children there, of such fair colour that one would think they were entirely white born. The trouble is, that the dark blood never disappears, and the children of the next generation may well be, and often are, dark coloured, even if the fair half caste marries a white man (Wilson, 1934).

This was a situation, which obviously could not be tolerated in a "civilised" nation. The governor, though, was also very clear who was to blame:

However much one may deprecate the fact that white men become fathers of these half-caste children, the blame must rest, to a very large extent, on the native girls, who by temperament, and a desire to have a child by a white father, encourage white men in every way. The proximity of the Settlements to townships like Murgon, and Wondai, in itself constitutes a temptation to the

girls, even if they do not go out to employment (Wilson, 1934).

The governor thought the solution was the complete locking up of the girls or the removal of the Cherbourg settlement (Kidd, 1997, p. 126). The Chief Protector, John Bleakley, was compelled to defend his department's policy. He reported that, while many girls got pregnant to white men while working on nearby farms, most of the births on the settlement too were "half-caste". He also pointed out that there were strong economic considerations behind the policy of allowing girls from Cherbourg to work as domestics (Kidd, 1997, p. 126). Bleakley must have felt it unnecessary to add that these girls were also a source of cheap labour for the white populations of Wondai and Murgon.

In terms of attitude towards the "blood", Bleakley's views were no different from that of the Governor's. Thus on the 23rd August 1934 he wrote to the Undersecretary, in defence of missions and settlements, to the effect that:

Not only do they protect the child races from the unscrupulous white, but they help to preserve the purity of the white race from the grave social dangers that always threaten where there is a degraded race living in loose conditions at its back door (Bleakley, cited in Kidd, 1997, p. 70).

That such views are deeply racist is surely beyond debate. Moreover, it must be granted that, since these views were held by the Chief Protector, this is also a significant indicator of the thrust of government policy. However, what is more controversial is to publicly point out that the racism has not gone away; Chris Sarra's thesis carefully documents contemporary attitudes among white Australians, showing a continuity between Bleakley and the present (Sarra, 2005). Indeed in official circles as late as 1960, the Director of Native Affairs, Cornelius O'Leary could say the following at a conference:

... the Government is not going to allow white and near white children whether their parents are black or white to remain on the Settlements at the cost of the tax payer. You have to educate coloured people to make the sacrifice to have their children adopted and so give them the chance to enjoy the privileges of the white community (cited in HREOC, 1997).

■ Specific attitudes and intentions towards the school

The process of schooling began at Cherbourg in 1903. To understand the aims and purposes of the schooling one must grasp the fact that it took place within the reserve system and seems never to have been designed

to clash with the over-arching purposes of that system. What were, then, these aims and purposes of the reserve system? Here Blake argues very convincingly that:

A principal objective of the Barrambah settlement was to control and discipline those removed there. Barrambah was never a passive institution where the displaced remnants of the indigenous inhabitants were able to maintain their culture and lifestyle without interference. Aboriginal culture was regarded as intrinsically inferior and a central feature of the settlement's modus operandi was the attempt to destroy the inmates' cultural identity and inculcate a "limited amount of civilisation" (Blake, 2001, p. 57).

The school, then, was to play a supporting role in this overall system; this was quite methodical in both planning and execution, as can be seen from the inspectorial reports. However this is not to say that there were no tensions or contradictions at work within the schooling system. The purposes of schooling were to reproduce the dominant values of the society; nevertheless, within the system, true education was still possible. There is always the risk of the reduplication of the "crime of Socrates" – the young may become capable of transforming society rather than reproducing it (Bhaskar, 1989, p. 77-80).

It may be worthwhile here to outline briefly some of the basic features of Bhaskarian sociology, which heavily informs the paper. To begin with, Bhaskar emphasises the reality of social structures. These may fail the test of *esse est percipi*, but they certainly meet the causal criterion of reality in that, although social structures may not be subject to perception, they do have effects (Bhaskar, 1989, p. 69). That this is not merely a matter of scholarly debate can be seen from the following, now notorious, statement made by Margaret Thatcher in 1987, while she was Prime Minister of England:

I think we've been through a period where too many people have been given to understand that if they have a problem, it's the government's job to cope with it. "I have a problem, I'll get a grant." "I'm homeless, the government must house me." They're casting their problem on society. And, you know, there is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women, and there are families. And no government can do anything except through people, and people must look to themselves first. It's our duty to look after ourselves and then, also to look after our neighbour. People have got the entitlements too much in mind, without the obligations. There's no such thing as entitlement, unless someone has first met an obligation (cited in Deer, 1987).

I will pass over the obvious inconsistency in the above statement (that families are real but society is not), to point out that behind the solipsism lies the desire to avoid responsibility for the evils that Thatcher's neo-liberal economics inflicted upon British society. In a similar vein I would argue that, if we are unwilling to admit the reality of social structures, then we can neither understand nor explain their role. This is crucially important if one accepts the notion that we are born into social structures. They exist before us, so, although they would not exist without us, we do not create them but can either reproduce or transform them. As Bhaskar puts it:

... people do not create society. For it always pre-exists them. Rather it is an ensemble of structures, practices and conventions that individuals reproduce or transform. But which would not exist unless they did so. Society does not exist independently of conscious human activity (the error of reification). But it is not the product of the latter (the error of voluntarism) (Bhaskar, 1989, p. 76).

Moreover I would like to emphasise that the transformation of these pre-existing social structures is no easy matter. It is certainly not, as the philosopher Richard Rorty argued, a merely linguistic affair. For Rorty:

To see a common social practice as cruel and unjust ... is a matter of redescription rather than discovery. It is a matter of changing vocabularies rather than of stripping away the veil of appearances from an objective reality, an experiment with new ways of speaking rather than of overcoming "false consciousness" (Rorty, cited in Bhaskar, 1991, p. 72).

However, the reality of the social structure that Aboriginal Australians have endured is not simply to be described away. Contra Rorty, Bhaskar has argued that:

... the identification of the source of an experienced injustice in social reality, necessary for changing or remedying it, involves much more than redescription, even if it depends on that too centrally. It is a matter of finding and disentangling webs of relations in social life, and engaging explanatory critiques of the practices that sustain them ... Moreover, such explanatory critiques will lead, *ceteris paribus*, to action rationally directed to transforming, dissolving or disconnecting the structures and relations which the experience of injustice and the other ills theoretically informed practice has diagnosed (Bhaskar, 1991, p. 72).

Here it is my firm conviction that a study of the history of the Cherbourg school enables one to understand both its role in the denial of education to Aboriginal people and the purpose of that denial. Nor should it be assumed that Aboriginal Australians were not aware of the inferiority of the education they received. The late Oodgeroo Nunuccal (n.d.) has captured this well in her poem "The Teachers":

(For Mother who was never taught to read
or write)

Holy men, you came to preach:
"Poor black heathen, we will teach
Sense of sin and fear of hell,
Fear of God and boss as well;
We will teach you work for play,
We will teach you to obey
Laws of God and laws of Mammon ..."
And we answered, "No more gammon,
If you have to teach the light,
Teach us first to read and write."

It is, of course, the ability to read and write that is essential for Indigenous Australians to identify the structures that oppress them, and it is the same ability that will give them the knowledge and power to transform those same structures.

Here Roth's report of 1906 sheds an interesting light on how the authorities viewed the transformative possibilities within true education. He is discussing the vexed questions of "half-caste" children and draws a comparison between the North of Queensland and the South. In the North contact with whites was limited and this appears to have been close to Roth's ideal. He writes:

There does not appear to be any marked tendency for the half-castes on the Northern missions to return to centres of European civilisation; their ignorance of the outside world, their almost complete isolation from the whites, the comparatively large areas comprising the reserves over which they have a free run, their training for settled agricultural work, and *a school education of purposely not too high a standard* are all of them factors which are concurrently bringing about this desirable state of affairs. So far, they are apparently content to live, marry and die there: their life is simple, happy, useful and God-fearing: they marry amongst themselves and with the full-bloods, though I understand that the latter unions are not encouraged (Roth, 1906, p. 12, emphasis added).

In the case of Cherbourg, contact with the whites could not be so easily policed and Roth's reports are often concerned with a need to maintain "protection" and to oppose or restrain the demand of the whites for cheap

labour and, of course, the never explicitly stated right to sexually exploit Aboriginal women. More significant for the purposes of this paper is his explicit approval of a minimalist approach to schooling, one which would preclude the possibility of education with its attendant danger of creating an educated stratum of Aborigines, who presumably would be difficult to control in that they might seek to transform, rather than to reproduce, the status quo.

That Roth need not have worried unduly about the Cherbourg school can be seen from a range of statistics that we will examine later. However, for the moment, I would argue that from its inception until at least the 50s there is an underlying continuity about Cherbourg School and that continuity was maintained because the primary purpose of the school was to discipline and control – certainly not to "educate". Thus, in the Inspector's report of 1910, we read:

The appearance of the children was in every way pleasing and their progress in the school satisfactory. No one could help remarking their bright intelligent faces and neat tidy appearance or feel anything but admiration for the splendid *control and discipline* exercised by their young teacher (Office of the Visiting Justice to Home Secretary's Office, 1910, emphasis added).

Nevertheless, beneath this concern for discipline there lurked the fear that the native would revert to the primitive Other. As the District Inspector put it in 1938:

The danger so far as they are concerned manifests itself after they leave school at about the age of 14 years until about 18 years. If brought under supervision and discipline they would be less apt to revert to the primitive as often threats [sic]. (Chadwick, 1936).

That discipline and control remained an ongoing concern can be seen from the discussion in 1948 on lowering the age at which schooling should commence. The Superintendent advocated an age of five for the following reasons:

The children here and I presume also on other Settlements have very lax home life and the older these children get the more encourageable [sic, incorrigible?] they become. On admission to school at five, they are immediately under discipline and are easily amendable, but should the school age be raised to six, by the time they reach 6, they are becoming little larrikins especially the boys without check from their parents with the result the children would become more difficult for the teacher to enforce his discipline also for the children to settle

down (Superintendent to Director of Native Affairs, 1948).

The request to lower the age of commencement did not fall on deaf ears, and by 1953 children were being admitted at a much younger age.

■ Can they be educated? The native mind hypothesis

The curriculum at Cherbourg seems to have gone through three distinct phases. The first of these lasted until 1930. It consisted of imparting a "very elementary knowledge of reading, writing and arithmetic" (Blake, 2001, p. 61). Other subjects such as manual arts for boys and sewing and darning for girls appeared intermittently, depending on factors such as teacher availability or interest (Blake, 2001, p. 61-2).

The second phase of the curriculum commenced in the early 1930s when the headmaster at Cherbourg, Robert Crawford, drew up a syllabus for native schools, designed to cover only four grades. The decision to institute this watered-down curriculum at Cherbourg and other settlements was reinforced and justified in terms of the supposed ability level of the pupils. Blake reports that it was judged that there was a "native mind" that did not suit western education. In Crawford's opinion his curriculum was of a sufficient standard because of "the difference in environment and mental ability between the aboriginal child and his white brother" (Crawford, cited in Blake, 2001, p. 62).

So the authorities appear to have vacillated between fears that the pupils would become educated and the assertion that this was not possible. In any case Blake describes the resulting curriculum as follows:

Within the classroom, the basic objectives were to continue to give a "very elementary knowledge of reading, writing and arithmetic". To accommodate the "native mind", the amount of time spent in each grade was considerably longer than the usual twelve months (Blake, 2001, p. 61).

How much longer the Cherbourg students were expected to take over their education can be gathered from this report.

The pupils are grouped into seven grades. Three years are spent in Prep, one year in G1, two years in grade II, two years in GIII, and one year in grade IV. The work does not extend beyond that of grade IV. There seems no reason, however, why the more intelligent pupils might not continue the work beyond the standard set down for GIV (District Inspector to Department of Public Instruction, 1932 – 1936).

Crawford's curriculum remained in place until 1953, when the new state syllabus was introduced and the

classes were completely regraded (1953 Report, Part One). In 1955 a Year 7 was added. However only eight pupils were able to proceed to Grade 8. A more optimistic assessment as to the mental ability of the pupils gradually emerged. Thus in the 1956 report we read:

It is evident that many of the children have a sufficiently high IQ to reach the standard demanded by the state school syllabus, but it places a great burden on the teachers in the attempt to make up for the deficiencies existing (Queensland Government, 1956, part one).

By 1957, one boy, Lawrence Bell, from the settlement secured a scholarship to study industrial Junior and two girls, Joan Shillingsworth and Iris Bell were granted concessional scholarships to undertake commercial Junior at Murgon High School (Cherbourg State School, 1957).

■ Strong and smart: The school in action

McConaghy's assertion, which I referred to above, that Aboriginal education was never designed to educate, will doubtless strike some as overly polemical. However a brief examination of how the school at Cherbourg was actually run, in my opinion, is ample warrant for her claim. How else is one to interpret the following?

In 1919 the District Inspector, Mr. R. Skelton reported on the poor conditions of the school building and the grounds. He noted that:

The schoolroom is a dilapidated weatherboard structure, unlined and unceiled [sic]. The roofing is secondhand corrugated iron with old nail holes in it through which rain drives in wet weather. Draughts and dust come in from every quarter, through gaping weather boards and flooring. The interior of the building is very hot in summer and very cold in winter, and a serious menace at all times to the health of teachers and pupils alike. The room has a floor space of 450sq. ft, which at 8 sq. ft. per child gives accommodation for less than 60 children. Yet 122 children were present at inspection, the second and third classes being taught outside under a temporary bough shelter which can only be used in favourable weather (Skelton, 1919).

A year later in 1920, the assistant teacher, Ester Gleghorn raised the matter of overcrowding with the Chief Protector:

Is it not a fact that you have a better barn recently erected with nothing to put in it than this school which has to accommodate at times over 120 children and blacks at that. I doubt much if you

could find a square yard in the roof walls or flooring without holes and cracks...The building is nothing more than a death trap. (Cleghorn, cited in Blake, 2001, p. 59)

Cleghorn’s plea was to fall on deaf ears, for two years later we read the following in the archive:

Department of Public Instruction – the government fails to secure the general good order required for normal working conditions. Classes IV, III and II (nearly 60 pupils) work in an open shed under the Head teacher and there good order is maintained. The drafts of class I (87 pupils) occupy the two classrooms and the boarded-in front verandah of the school building. The assistant teacher cannot control and teach children distributed over three rooms. At least two additional teachers are required to make an effective staff. The grounds are bare and unattractive and no attempt has been made to provide a children’s garden. The main schoolrooms and the verandah are unlined, not weather proof and are badly lighted. The seats and the walls of the closets are kept clean, but the pans should be cleared more frequently (Skelton, 1922).

Nor was this report destined to bear much fruit, for 14 years later the following appears in the records:

Organisation – over-crowded conditions exist, and two divisions at least must of necessity be accommodated on the verandah. Conditions on the verandah are unsatisfactory for teaching and also so far as the pupils are personally concerned themselves; in summer there is the glare of the sun to contend with, in winter, the cold winds, while wet weather renders conditions very uncomfortable. It is very necessary that extra accommodation be provided by an addition to the present building; the whole structure, moreover, requires to be re-painted (Chadwick, 1936).

Nor were the problems confined to the lack of provision of suitable buildings. If one examines the statistics on the pupil to teacher ratio a shocking picture emerges (see Table 1).

Lest it might be thought that conditions at Cherbourg were not qualitatively different from conditions prevailing within white education we need to look at the fascinating instance of Cherbourg’s other school.

Table 1: Statistics on pupil/teacher ratio 1919-1954.

Year	Number of Children	Number of Teachers	Comments
1919	125 children	2 teachers	62 children per class (Skelton, 1919)
1925	Over 200 pupils	Head teacher and two assistants	1925 Report
1927	202 children	2 teachers	Average attendance for the month of June 186 (Home Secretary’s Department to Visiting Justice, 1927)
1936	190 children	3 teachers	The head teacher has 53 students under his direct control from GIII and GIV, while each Assistant teacher responsible for 81 and 85 students respectively. (Chadwick, 1936)
1938	232 students	3 teachers	“Although retardation appears somewhat heavy in the lower school, this is the common experience in other schools. No doubt it is caused by the character and type of the pupil handled.” (District Inspector to Department of Public Instruction, 1938)
1940	221 children	Unknown	
1949	264-258 children		
1952	297-291 children		
1953	302-304 children		The new state school syllabus was introduced here this year and this necessitated a complete regrading of classes. Some classes were combined making very large numbers in these grades
1954	313 in June 1953 to 299 March in 1954		

■ The school within the school

It is a fact not so well known, but nevertheless significant, that there were, for a period, two schools at Cherbourg. Blake in his summary of the education being provided for the “natives” informs us in a note that:

The view that the standard of education in the school was not comparable to the state system was shared by the white officials on the settlement. They refused to send their own children to the school. When the number of white children of the settlement was sufficient for a school, the staff lobbied the government to set up a school for their children (Blake, 2001, p. 261).

That lobbying process is in itself important to analyse, for not only does it provide us with an insight into the inadequacy of the education being provided for the “natives”, but it also reveals what one can only describe as the truth of the underlying relationship between the white community and the people of Cherbourg. In the archives we read the following:

An objection to the white children being taught in the aboriginal school is the deleterious effect on the character of the white children, boys especially – the natives look up to the white boy, attend to his wants, and hence he develops a sense of superiority – he misses the training which a boy receives when running with those who are his equals or his superiors (District Inspector to Department of Public Instruction, 1932–1936).

On the surface Gower appears to be concerned about the white children developing a sense of superiority or being spoiled by coming into too close contact with the “natives”. However this concern did not extend to any consciousness of the difference in provision that ensued when the white school was opened in 1932. There were initially 14 children, rising to 17 and the school closed in 1941 when the numbers dropped to 5. So for much of the life of the school the teacher pupil ratio was 1 to 14. We can understand something of the significance of this figure if we compare them with the data on the school for Aborigines. There the picture was quite grim:

For an average attendance of approximately 190 children, a staff of three teachers has been allotted. They have the somewhat negative assistance of four native monitors whose actual help is naturally not of much practical value. The head teacher has under his direct control GIII and GIV with an enrolment of 53 pupils; while each A.T. is responsible for 81 and 85 pupils

respectively (District Inspector to Department of Public Instruction, 1932–1936).

However the teacher pupil ratio was not the only concern of those who set up the white school. Much care was taken to ensure racial separation in sanitary matters. Thus we read:

Regarding the Sanitary Conveniences: the lavatories at present situated at the Recreation Hall are being thoroughly scrubbed and disinfected, new pan steads are being fitted, and the doors are being fitted with suitable locks and keys. The keys will be handed to the incoming teacher (Crawford, cited in Blake, 2001, p. 38).

In this concern to ensure separate sanitary provisions for the white children, there are echoes of the initial fears and attitudes underlying the setting up of the Cherbourg Settlement. In this context Blake reports that:

The sick were also removed if their particular illness was regarded as a threat to the health of the white community. The one malady about which whites were most sensitive was venereal disease. Any Aboriginal person suspected of this disease was quickly sent to Barrambah, ostensibly “for treatment” but in reality to prevent contaminating the white population (Blake, 2001, p. 38).

So social and educational inequality were the lot of those attending Cherbourg State School. Moreover to witness this inequality they had to look no further than the “Provisional School” set up for the white children.

■ Aboriginal views

Ada Simpson attended Cherbourg State School from 1949–1963 and has shared her experiences of her schooling as a student at Cherbourg State School. She discussed how they had to learn about and attend to domestic duties to enable them to provide services in the white community as domestics in the city:

We would go to the Domestic Science and the boys would go to the rural school to learn skills of woodwork and the girls had to learn skills of domestic duties, cleaning houses, making beds, cooking and sewing. We were taught in the domestic science to equip ourselves for later life and be able to cook, clean and sew for service in the wider community (cited in Strong & Smart Foundation, 2004).

Ruth Hegarty, a student from 1934–1943, recalled her opinions about schooling during this era. She reinforced Blake’s perceptions about the control and discipline at the school by stating:

There was no culture, definitely no culture being taught in the school and language was out. Everybody had to speak English (cited in Strong & Smart Foundation, 2004).

Ruth Hegarty attended school from the age of four and a half years to 14 years old going through the process of learning the 3R's – reading, writing and arithmetic. Ruth states:

Mr Crawford who was the headmaster said we would never achieve because we were black people because our brain couldn't contain as much as our white brothers (cited in Strong & Smart Foundation, 2004).

She also recalls how violent the principal was towards them at Cherbourg School: "The strap or the cane was used upon us – it was such a violent act sometimes when they would beat us with the cane" (cited in Strong & Smart Foundation, 2004).

John Stanley, who is presently employed at the school, and was the Community Education Counsellor at Murgon State High School for many years, has summed up his feelings about his schooling and the schooling of many Indigenous students he saw go through the system. He has strongly emphasised the constant failures for Indigenous people in the education system and that the system failed Indigenous people.

Being on an Aboriginal community the emphasis was to get our children into school, teach them in a white man environment. Taken away from them was the opportunity of what they would have had with their own elders and their own leaders in their communities and being taught the cultural aspects of their community (cited in Strong & Smart Foundation, 2004).

Other Indigenous people interviewed made comments about how the education system was primarily set up to fail Indigenous people; and a male student spoke of two laws at Cherbourg – one for the white people and one for the black people, with no quality of their education.

A Queensland man who was removed to Cherbourg in the 1940s states:

I don't know who decided to educate the Aboriginal people but the standard was low in these mission areas. I started school at the age of eight at grade 1, no pre-school. I attended school for six years, the sixth year we attended grade 4, then after that we left school, probably [at] 14 years (cited in HREOC, 1997, p.170)

■ Conclusion

Here I would argue that the historical record supports no other conclusion than that Cherbourg State School was for most of its existence a hindrance and not an aid to Aboriginal development. The sad irony is that Cherbourg School was a success, but not in terms of Aboriginal education but rather in terms of its primary mission of the oppression of Aborigines.

I am aware that this conclusion will be seen as controversial and yet another instance of what Geoffrey Blainey and previous Prime Minister Howard have dubbed the "black arm band view of Australian history". Again I am content to leave the last word to the historical record. In the 1917 report we read the following:

Department of Public Instruction – the discipline is firm and cheerful. The children are docile and obedient ... If the object of this school be to keep the children quiet, and out of mischief during the daytime, and to train them to be lazy with as much incidental teaching as one teacher can give to 117 children in five different classes in an over-crowded room with less floor space than 4 square feet to each child, it is a success, but if the aim is to cultivate their intelligence, to give exercise to their self activity, to train them to be industrious and self reliant with a fair knowledge of the work of class III when leaving, the school is a failure (District Inspector to Department of Public Instruction, 1917).

■ Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the children and Indigenous staff of Cherbourg State School and especially the elders and members of the Cherbourg community for assisting me in my research.

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