
REVIEW ARTICLE

The ‘Stolen Generations’: A Report from Experience

Kenneth Maddock

*Colin Macleod, **Patrol in the Dreamtime**, Random House, Milsons Point, 1997*

COLIN MACLEOD’S unpretentious memoir recalls the lost Aboriginal world of the Northern Territory 40 years ago. It is not a world to which he looks back in anger, but neither does he see it through a rosy haze. From his second afternoon in Darwin, spent visiting native camps with Gordon Sweeney, a former missionary, he remembers

squalor and destitution: mangy dogs, dust everywhere, rubbish strewn across the camp, a couple of sticks slowly smouldering, the yabba yabba of what was to me aimless conversation, women dressed in dirty old cotton frocks, men in loincloths, kids with runny noses, flies in their eyes. There was no running water, no showers, no sewerage ... the people seemed bewildered. (p. 29)

Macleod had barely turned 21 when he left Melbourne for the Territory as a cadet patrol officer in the Welfare Branch. Until then he had known the secure tedium of clerking at the Williamstown Naval Dockyards, a stint of National Service, a mediocre record as a pupil in Catholic schools. More loftily, there had been a half aspiration to the priestly life, followed by fantasies about the Fleet Air Arm — how wonderful ‘to swagger through the dockyard gates, rigged in a bright new Sub Lieutenant’s blue uniform, gold wings embroidered above the gold ring on the sleeves’ (p. 14).

He and his kind, the ‘young blokes’ who became patrol officers in the Territory or in New Guinea, wanted ‘adventure and a change from the mundane’ (p. 97). Saving the natives or doing altruistic social work were not on the agenda. As we follow Macleod through town camps, across vast pastoral properties, to government welfare settlements and Catholic missions, into the desert or out to the mouldering

Kenneth Maddock is Professor Emeritus of Anthropology at Macquarie University.

township of Borroloola in the Gulf country, we can guess that he got what he wanted. Yet it cannot have been enough, for within a few years of his arrival in 1955 he threw it away, becoming a full-time student of law at the University of Melbourne in 1959. Since then, however, while pursuing a career at the bar or on the bench, he has occasionally revisited the Territory, and so is able briefly to compare then with now.

No doubt it is convenient for governments that young men can always be found who crave after action and adventure in the open air. But if this is what the Welfare Branch could offer a patrol officer, there was a more serious point to its existence, which was to prepare Aborigines for assimilation into society at large. Part of the value of *Patrol in the Dreamtime* is that, in the unassuming form of a slice of one man's life, it throws light on what it was like doing spadework for an objective that many people are now quick to condemn. Macleod himself must have become completely disillusioned with the system, for in 1959, in an article for the Melbourne journal *Prospect*, he described the welfare settlements of the Territory as 'human zoos' (p. 229). Today he is less severe. Halfway houses were necessary, 'and so the settlements were probably as good as any other solution ... If there hadn't been a system holding back the thousands of natives that wanted to flock to the towns, Third World humpies and nightmare slums and exploitation by the white population would have been far worse' (p. 230).

Macleod was spurred into writing his memoir by irritation at the emotive and often uninformed debate over so-called 'stolen generations', the Aboriginal children removed from their families or mothers and either fostered out or put in such institutions as Sister Kate's in Perth, the board of management of which was once adorned by a lawyer named Ronald Wilson, who later became a judge of the High Court and later still lent his name to allegations of Australian genocide.

The 'Generation At Risk'

Sister Kate's is a good case to think about, because of the abyss which separates the views expressed when it was opened on 19 February 1972 and those that are now put forward about institutions of the kind. Professor W. E. H. Stanner, the most distinguished scholar of his day in the field of Aboriginal social anthropology, a man who was active and eloquent both publicly and behind the scenes in advancing what he took to be Aboriginal interests and in conveying to the population at large a subtle sense of what Aboriginal tradition meant to its inheritors, gave an opening address which is more fascinating to read today than it would have been to hear then.

Stanner began by conveying an apology from Dr ('Nugget') Coombs who was unavoidably absent. 'It would have meant a great deal to him — both as a West Australian and as a tireless worker for a better future for all the Aboriginal people — to be here to speak in his own way about his personal and official interest in ... Sister Kate's Children's Home. But it just could not be.' Nevertheless, Stanner hoped that Nugget would soon visit the Home to 'learn at first hand of the proposals for future developments', and that he would be accompanied by Barry Dexter, a

leading public servant of the time, who with Stanner and Coombs formed the Council of Aboriginal Affairs, a triumvirate of wise elders who gave top-level advice to the Commonwealth government.

If Stanner appreciated Sister Kate's endeavour, it was out of conviction 'that one of the oldest insights in Australian history is our perception that, if we could do anything at all for the Aborigines, our best hopes lay in doing it through their youths and children. I think that is still as true and valid as it ever was'. At Sister Kate's he could 'see for [him]self how ... at least some of these children are being given a prospect of a better life'.

A restless desire by the well-meaning to do something for what Stanner called 'the generation at risk', meaning Aboriginal children of school age or younger, runs like a thread through Australian history. It shows up in the eclectic and freethinking Phyllis Kaberry, an anthropologist contemporary with Stanner. During her fieldwork in 1934 at the Forrest River Mission in the Kimberleys, she became concerned at the plight of eleven half-caste girls in late adolescence. Because there were only two or three half-caste boys of a suitable age for them to marry and because 'of the absolute undesirability of marriage with a full-blood, the position of the remaining half-caste girls presents an extremely difficult problem. Perhaps one solution would be to send them to a half-caste mission such as Yarrabah in Queensland' (Kaberry, 1935:420).

Marie Reay, a generation later among anthropologists and an admirer of Stanner's, argued that policy should be sufficiently flexible for Aborigines 'to make their own choices without being brainwashed by do-gooders and petty officials' (Reay, 1964:xx). This was in *Aborigines Now*, her collection of essays by some Young Turks of the discipline. Neither the 'stealing' of children nor the commission of 'genocide' rated a mention. Nearly a quarter of a century later she did raise the former topic in a foreword for *Being Black*, a new collection which is really a latter-day version of her own book. Working decades earlier with Aborigines of mixed descent in eastern Australia, Reay had found a fear among women that children might 'be rounded up and taken away to an institution just because they were Aboriginal'. She comments that, although the removal of children occasionally happened, few of the women 'appreciated that by the 1940s the children who were institutionalised were those who were judged to be neglected, whether they were black or white'. Critical to a child's fate was whether it had a grandmother to demonstrate 'practical concern' as distinct from the 'sentimental concern' displayed by mothers: 'children who were taken away were those who had no grannies, were skinny and unkept [unkempt?], wagged school, and subsisted on whatever they could scrounge from their various aunts' (Reay, 1988:ix).

Her publications show the strength of Reay's interest in Aboriginal women and family life. Her colleague and younger contemporary Diane Barwick had the same interest. I do not recall that either woman wrote of 'genocide' or did more than touch in passing on the 'theft' of children. There must be significance in their silence. Were they so obtuse and callous as to fail to see what was going on before their eyes? Or is it that today the past is being twisted by falsification, special plead-

ing and anachronistic moralising?

The latter is the likely explanation. A telling consideration here is that the Australian Law Reform Commission, in a substantial report on Aboriginal customary law based on work carried out between 1977 and 1985, devoted a chapter to 'Aboriginal Child Custody, Fostering and Adoption', but did not suggest that the removal of children constituted genocide, even though it accepted that 'large numbers of Aboriginal children [had been] removed from their families and placed within non-Aboriginal families and in institutions' (1986: para. 351). In a brief discussion of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, the Commission noted that 'genocide is restricted to forms of physical destruction. It does not include even deliberate acts aimed at the assimilation of a minority group or what is sometimes referred to as "cultural genocide"' (para. 171).

It is at this point that one can turn back to Macleod, whose observations were of the Northern Territory. The government was removing part-Aboriginal children on welfare grounds in his time, though he says it was no longer happening to children of full blood. Memory has the power to disturb, but it does not lead Macleod into condemnation, for he considers the practice averted much worse befalling those subjected to it, who were more often girls than boys (for horrific examples of what they could suffer, see pp. 171 and 175-6). Noting that in the Darwin of the 1950s the Welfare Branch did get criticised for taking children, he asks:

But what if the mother was barely out of puberty, with no way of independently looking after herself, let alone her child? What if the mother was under the influence of some dissolute itinerant stockman? Young girls were becoming mothers way before they were old enough to be good mothers, in conditions of unspeakable squalor and cruelty, often inflicted by the child's father — if he had bothered to hang around — but more likely at the hands of those in the Aboriginal community who had no truck with 'yella fellas'. (p. 166)

Before me as I write I have an article by Rosemary O'Grady, a lawyer who cannot be numbered among Sir Ronald Wilson's admirers. She, too, has some questions, but hers are for the 1990s. How would a barrister advise 'a person who, a few years from now, seeks a remedy for child abuse now being suffered in [Aboriginal] communities?' Who sees to the rights of children when 'the authorities do nothing'? When 'welfare does get involved, the child is frequently "placed" back in the same household from which it has been, ostensibly, removed'. At a community in South Australia, 'wife-bashing, assaults and child abuse have sky-rocketed', while at another, owing to brawls among drinkers, 'It is impossible for anyone to sleep. It sounds at 2.30am like a war zone' (O'Grady, 1998:53-4).

O'Grady's cry from the heart, which reads like a depressing footnote to Macleod, might be criticised from the standpoint of conventional legal wisdom, according to which one should never get emotionally involved with a client, though in her case she has taken aboard the interests of an entire population. But in the light

of Colin Tatz's relatively more detached survey of the state of Aboriginal communities she cannot be dismissed as obviously overwrought. In 1989-90 Tatz surveyed 70 communities across the country, some of which he had known for decades. Among the 'realities for which there is, regrettably, abundant evidence' (1990:250), Tatz included (i) the great deal of personal violence within Aboriginal groups, even within families; (ii) the great deal of child neglect, as in hunger and lack of general care; and (iii) the considerable amount of violence and damage committed in sober states. He acknowledges that 'there is evidence from a number of scholars to show that [these realities] have a basis in tribal tradition', unlike other 'realities' which have arisen from culture contact. Tatz does not deal with child removals in his paper, but we can be sure that some of the situations he so candidly describes would have been seen by an old-fashioned public servant like Macleod as ones from which it could be justifiable to rescue children.

I arrived in the Territory for anthropological fieldwork in 1964, five years after Macleod left. In that year nearly all the legal disabilities to which Aborigines were subject in his time were repealed by the Social Welfare Ordinance. But because the new law came into effect only later in the year I was able to catch a glimpse of the restrictive regime he had helped administer. To a university intellectual for whom life was virtually synonymous with what the beautiful harbour cities of Auckland and Sydney had to offer, conditions in the Territory were harsh and Aboriginal affairs afflicted with a petty dullness. It would have seemed absurd, however, to impute evil to the regime, and I cannot recall anyone doing so, let alone suggesting that genocide was being or had been until recently practised under the guise of child welfare. My acquaintances included academics who travelled widely in the Territory to do research, some of whom, like the outspoken political scientist Tatz, the prehistorian Carmel White and the anthropologist John Bern, were of Jewish background and interested in Israel. That even they, to the best of my recollection, caught not a whiff of genocide throws into relief the hyperbolic excesses to which some latter-day commentators have succumbed.

Policy and Progress

No reader of Macleod's book is likely to finish it feeling that all was well in the 1950s. As he remarks, 'Even liberally-minded Europeans lived with assumptions we would today shudder at' (p. 70), though the example he gives to illustrate the point is so innocuous that it could cause only the most timorous to tremble. Comparing my memories of the 1960s with his, I am sure that in the intervening decade life had become freer, more hopeful and materially better for many Aborigines, perhaps for them all, but it would be churlish to deny that these were ends at which the Welfare Branch and the government of the day were aiming. I do not remember town camps like those he visited on his second day in Darwin; and the Beswick Reserve, where I did most of my research between 1964 and 1970, was a different place in my time. Whatever criticism one might make (on which see Maddock, 1977), the settlement there had ceased to be 'a haphazard assortment of lean to's

[sic], humpies and huts constructed with bush timber and bark, cast-off materials such as hessian and rusted iron sheets, and the occasional piece of milled timber'; children were no longer 'regularly suffer[ing] from infected ears, and running noses and eyes'; and it would have been travesty to describe the food provided by the communal kitchen as 'terrible' or to characterise life in the camp as 'crowding, squalor and diseased dogs' (pp. 81-5). At a more general level it was inevitable that the extension of citizenship rights would curtail petty interference in people's lives, and likely that it would lead to land rights in some form.

Yet Tatz for one is a shaken man — with good reason, too, if he and O'Grady are drawing from life. Because the picture they give conflicts with my observations in the parts of Queensland, Western Australia and the Northern Territory which I have visited in admittedly random travels between 1978 and 1998, it is tempting, if unkind, to suspect that they are sensation-mongering. Unfortunately, as *Patrol in the Dreamtime* shows, it is not so simple.

In 1983 and 1995 Macleod revisited Melville and Bathurst Islands, which he knew well from earlier days, only to go away with a sense of decline and of lost vitality. 'There were no canoes in sight, no new grave poles, the gardens did not seem attended, and the sawmill was in ruins' (p. 136). It surprised him to find a 'large number of non-Aboriginals working there, compared to 1957, in spite of a supposed "independence" ... both islands boasted an Alcoholics Anonymous group and women's groups to help deal with domestic violence' (p. 228).

Some of Macleod's impressions are supported by the research of Eric Venbrux, a Dutch anthropologist who worked among the Tiwi on Melville and Bathurst Islands between 1988 and 1991. He found that homicide was occurring at ten times the United States rate. Because violence was even more common in pre-contact times, its modern level could not be blamed simply on Europeans. Rather, was it an effect, unforeseen and unintended, of the policy of self-determination adopted in the 1970s (Venbrux, 1995:16-17, 223-4). More recently, of course, Melville and Bathurst Islands have been in the news because of all the young men who kill themselves.

In spite of these gloomy indications I would not argue that Aboriginal communities are bringing about their own destruction, though there might be a stronger case for asserting it than for believing that they used to suffer genocide by child welfare. What is less doubtful is that many woes in Aboriginal life today spring from Aborigines themselves and from the policies that govern them. A wider recognition of this may come about if those involved in the Aboriginal affairs of our day report on their experience in the down-to-earth manner that Macleod has for his.

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