

complex questions as to how the conditions and experiences of Aboriginal people in the past, and their reactions to these, continue to shape their experiences of the present.

Reference

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It's not the money it's the land: Aboriginal stockmen and the equal wages case by Bill Bunbury, 192pp, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 2002. \$24.95.

This very readable book is based on the Radio National Hindsight series broadcast in 2000. It tells us a story of the failure of settlers' 'good intentions' towards Aboriginal people.

The storyline is quite simple and probably well-known: in many parts of northern Australia Aboriginal stock workers had been underpaid and exploited by colonial pastoralism since the late nineteenth century. When equal wages were finally awarded to Aboriginal workers in 1965, most Aboriginal people – not only workers but also their families – were forced to leave the stations (ie their countries) and live in townships with the new social problems of boredom, unemployment and alcohol, instead of enjoying racial and economic equality. Taking an overview of the history of the pastoral frontier as well as carefully examining the sequence of events leading to the introduction of the Equal Wages Case, Bill Bunbury explores the questions of 'how' and 'why' this happened, drawing on the views of professional historians, Aboriginal ex-stock workers, unionists, and many other witnesses of the event. I acknowledge Bunbury's challenging task of not only documenting the sequence of events but also locating the story in the wider map of 'assimilation' in order to learn from past mistakes. As Bunbury states, 'the equal wages story is strongly tied to issues like 'Native Title', 'welfare dependence', 'the Stolen Generations' and, both then and now, to the doctrine of 'assimilation'' (p 70).

In terms of giving an overall picture of the Aboriginal history of pastoral Australia, Bunbury's framework is mostly provided by some prominent historians such as Geoffrey Bolton, Ann McGrath and Gillian Cowlshaw: while Aboriginal people in the pastoral frontier were the victims of racism and undoubtedly exploited by the settlers, their feudalistic race relation with pastoralists was based on mutual compromise, and 'both parties informally negotiated a new arrangement' (p 23). This view has been widely accepted since the 1980s and has the advantage of emphasising how disastrous the later introduction of the Equal Wages Case was. Nevertheless, it seems to me that this view contains a serious contradiction: how could racism and exploitation coexist with acknowledgement of 'mutual interdependence' (p 12)? It should be noted that Aboriginal oral histories in most publications rarely state that their relationship with pastoralists was 'mutual', not to mention 'equal' or 'interdependent'. In many cases this view of 'mutual

interdependence' is deduced by professional historians from Aboriginal oral evidence about how it was a 'good life' living in the cattle countries. However, it is important to listen to what Aboriginal people are literally saying; they are not always acknowledging the mutual 'race relations', but are often simply stating their affection for the 'stockworking life with cattle in their countries'. In other words, it was not the settlers' treatment of Aboriginal people but their relationship with cattle and country that Aboriginal people managed to negotiate and compromise (Hokari 2001). Therefore, although Bunbury's picture of the overall history of the pastoral frontier does reflect a standard view among the historians today, I do not necessarily agree with it.

When discussing the sequence of events preceding the introduction of equal wages, Bunbury gives us much insight into the failure of assimilation theory and policy. It is hard to disagree that the introduction of equal wages was ethically unavoidable. Nonetheless, settlers' 'good intentions', based on the idea that 'Aboriginal people should have the same rights as other Australians', clearly failed. When equal wages were finally awarded to the Aboriginal workers, pastoralists refused (or could not afford) to pay all the workers they had previously employed. Other than a few skilled workers, station owners kicked most of the Aboriginal population out from 'their properties'. The well-intentioned Equal Wages Case resulted in the exile of Aboriginal population from their countries to the townships. Aboriginal people not only lost their jobs but also their access to ancestral land. Even though the latter part of this book describes some efforts to return their countries, such as the outstation movement and Aboriginal-owned station management, Bunbury is careful to emphasise that the impact of the event was so strong that there is still a long way to go to full recovery.

A key factor for understanding this failure is, according to Bunbury, the 'lack of communication'. If Aboriginal people had been informed of the expected sequence of the Equal Wages Case and had the opportunity to express their desires about the future, the shape and the effect of the Case would have been different. It is shocking to learn that the Case was discussed, prepared and introduced without any consultation with the Aboriginal workers. Even Dexter Daniels, one of the few Aboriginal unionists in Darwin, was not called to appear before the Conciliation and Arbitration Commission (p 98). Hal Wootten, Junior Counsel in the Equal Wages Case, gives his observations when they visited cattle stations:

On one side the rest of the Aboriginal community silent, uncommunicative, not making a sound, and on the other side all the white fellows in the case, the union representatives, the judges, the Commonwealth representatives, the pastoralists and absolutely no interaction or communication between the two groups. (p 95)

In my view, such a failure of communication was probably grounded in what Ghassan Hage calls the 'White Nation Fantasy': it is a disposition that both 'evil' and 'good' whitefellas tend to imagine Australia as a place for white governance (Hage 1998). In this sense the 'lack of communication' was not the dead past of assimilation policy, but is still alive today both in the 'evil' One Nation movement and in 'good' multiculturalism, and possibly even in the idea of 'self-determination'. The 'well-intentioned' idea that 'we should give Aboriginal people the same rights as us' or 'we should consider Aboriginal rights in our policy making' tacitly presumes white Australians are the governors of all Australians. Therefore, I believe Bunbury's message of learning

from the 'failure of communication' is of fundamental importance for shifting the question from 'is it a good intention?' to 'whose intention is it?'

References

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Papunya Tula: genesis and genius, edited by Hannah Fink and Hetti Perkins, Art Gallery of NSW, Sydney, 2000, 319pp. ISBN 0734763069 (pbk.) 0734763107 (Hbk), \$50.00.

The story of how people at Papunya began painting in 1970 has been told many times in books, articles and exhibition catalogues, notably by Geoff Bardon, the art teacher who started it all. The essays published in this lavishly illustrated catalogue of the retrospective exhibition in 2000 at the Art Gallery of New South Wales add some depth to earlier accounts and bring the story up to date. Several of the contributors provide overviews of the painting movement from different perspectives: the editors outline the various styles and practices characteristic of the work of individual artists and of successive periods; Vivien Johnson's 'brief history' focuses on the intentions of the artists and on the strategies and tactics of those engaged to manage the painting company as 'advisers', 'coordinators' and 'field officers'; and Fred Myers discusses the processes by which the market for the paintings was developed. Paul Carter provides 'a critical account of the movement's beginnings' in 1971 and 1972, and Bardon himself reflects on his interactions with the artists at that time.

The contributions of several others who have been directly involved in supporting the Papunya Tula painters and organising the exhibition and marketing of their work in the past 30 years present a variety of views and viewpoints. Dick Kimber writes of his close association with Papunya Tula in the 1970s and beyond, and John Kean describes his experiences as an 'art adviser', visiting outstations in the late 1970s. Hetti Perkins interviewed Daphne Williams and tells the story of Williams' 'shrewd and steady stewardship of the company' in the twenty years since she started as a field officer in 1981. Marcia Langton contributes a discussion of the relationship of the painting to landscape and the 'sacredness of place' and Kimber offers a sampling of the dreaming stories of the Western Desert region. Splendid photographs of the artists and others - at work or posing for the camera, in their country or visiting foreign parts - are scattered through the text.

In addition to these articles, the editors provide a list of the paintings shown in the exhibition and reproduced in the book (149 by my count) with expanded accounts of the 'stories' of many of them, and biographical notes on the 49 artists represented, ten of whom are women. A lengthy chronology at the end of the volume, as well as listing