

BORN OR REBORN IN THE CATTLE?

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'Tolerance, Fortitude and Patience' – passive, martyr-like virtues first attributed to station Aborigines by the Berndts – was a surprising choice of title for Tim Rowse's review article (*Meanjin* 1/1988). These words would never be used by station Aborigines, and the motto has cultural significance only for Europeans. Although Rowse's comparative review of my book, *Born in the Cattle: Aborigines in Cattle Country*, and R. M. and C. H. Berndt's *End of an Era* was generally balanced, intelligible and even flattering, its last section contained some comments and criticisms which I strongly dispute.

Rowse argues that there is 'no present' in *Born in the Cattle*, 'no attempt to place the act of recall in history'. Yet its introduction summarises the contemporary situation of ex-station Aborigines, and the final chapter, 'No Shame Job', often departs from the book's 1910–40 time-frame to reveal ongoing cultural change and new definitions of identity and tradition. Indeed, one historian has categorised my work as 'presentist', and therefore – according to his definition – not 'pure' history. In researching and writing this book, I knew the material unearthed was relevant to the current social and political scenario for Aborigines and Europeans, and some of these links were drawn throughout the text.

History is certainly a discourse between present and past, and in more distant, document-based history, the dialogue exists between the lone historian and the written evidence. But what informs the questions historians ask of the past? 'Myth-testing' is one enterprise: existing popular and academic interpretations thus have their influence, as do the individual historian's present concerns. These might flow from an unresolved issue in his or her contemporary society, or from the 'scholarly' pool of recent academic debates. When a pluralistic swag of sources is used and presented, history can read like a multi-faceted conversation. Emphases are suggested by sources and selected by historians who reach conclusions and make judgements. Historians have an active role in teasing out patterns of meaning from the past and presenting readers with a version of it believed to reflect 'truth'. It is inevitable, however, that different readers will be struck by different voices, interpreting the text according to their own experiences, preconceptions and preoccupations. When it comes to the dialectical

relationship between the past and the 'relevant present', readers are usually left room to draw their own conclusions.

A particular present serves as the context in which a history is written, but it is not its subject matter. It may supply yardsticks and relevant questions. In *Born in the Cattle*, past processes that have influenced the present include the continuing meaning of Aboriginal pride in stock work. 'Lessons for the present' or 'insights into social relations' can be gleaned by exploring such issues. But fully to locate the meaning of the past for people living in the present, as Rowse demands, is a very different project – one requiring thorough research and analysis, leading in another direction from my own work. Such a project would necessitate a study of a contemporary society; it would deal with the ideological role of memory; it would be about history but would not be a history.

This is not to suggest that historians are unaware of questions which relate to 'placing the act of recall in history'. Over the past decade, we have debated and written about this process at length, at venues such as Oral History Association Conferences. I have published elsewhere on the topic. Important and complex issues are involved, but I believe lengthy methodological debates are better placed outside the covers of a book intended for a general readership. Like other social historians attempting to reach 'the people', I chose to make my analysis as widely accessible as possible.

Rowse exaggerates, however, when he argues that my book shows 'no interest' in 'what it means now to remember the past the way these people did for her'. The motives for Aboriginal co-operation were understood, as explained in the book's introduction:

Aborigines wanted their story to be told . . . *they* now see the work they performed on stations as an important feature of their lives. Their identity as station workers does not detract from the strength of their identity as Aborigines. They maintained self-esteem in a typically racist frontier, and through the life they created on stations, ensured the physical and cultural survival of their people, and a rich heritage of bush and station worlds which their children may enjoy today. (pp. viii–ix)

They wanted to challenge the negative stereotype of Aborigines as bludgers, and felt their pioneering role in building up the cattle stations should finally be recognised.

Rowse's concern about the role of the present in my work is obviously a reaction to its use of Aboriginal oral history sources. Although a wealth of oral history and autobiographical work has been published in this field, *Born in the Cattle* is probably the first to integrate such a substantial amount of oral evidence into an historical analysis. Rowse is inaccurate, however, when he claims it is 'based largely on interviews'. In illustrating a point, I have often favoured quotations from the mouths of participants, and hence about a third of my references are to tapes or texts based upon them. But the bulk

of the research effort (the four tea-chests of notes that followed me around Australia) was based on a great swag of archival records, newspapers, station journals and diaries, travellers' reminiscences and anthropological and other data.

Oral evidence is still viewed as a contentious source, and I was well aware it would provoke controversy. Unlike lawyers or anthropologists, historians are thought to lack the skills to handle verbal evidence reliably. Otherwise, why didn't Rowse ask for a textual analysis of the newspapers of the day, or a larger critique of the ideological construction of station books or archival letters? These sources, plus newspaper articles and accounts by popular authors, are rarely written immediately after the event; they are already 'recalling' at some distance. I am convinced that oral evidence can be tested alongside the varied array of other sources that were at my disposal. As I wrote in my methodological appendix, 'In ways the debate about oral history resembles that about the oral contraceptive. While the surfeit of information on harmful side-effects is worrying, other methods have equally disturbing risks . . .' The scepticism such debate has engendered, combined with our cultural faith in the written word, leads to a more critical approach when using oral sources. This becomes the historian's prophylactic.

Contemporary sources are rarely available from Aboriginal perspectives. Occasionally a policeman has written down Aboriginal testimonies regarding criminal offences, and in at least one case I was able to cross-check this with the leader of a Wave Hill protest in the 1930s. A host of other sources, however, can corroborate 'what life was like' on the stations, and where two perspectives could not be fully reconciled, this has been noted in my discussion (for examples, see pp. 65 and 142).

The Morphys' article, which Rowse quotes, indeed provides an excellent anthropological consideration of oral history. Nonetheless, similar points are already implicit throughout my first chapter, where I argue:

Aboriginal stories about the past are richly interpretative, revealing as much about the present society and its worldview as about the past . . . As in non-Aboriginal history, we must attempt to probe the relevance of their underlying assumptions and mythology. Part of the interest of such oral histories rests in their function as Aboriginal interpretations of colonialism. (p. 3)

Hence Rowse's advice offers nothing not already implied in the text. My discussion of Aboriginal explanations for 'coming in' from the bush to work for Europeans includes the Aboriginal distinctions between bush and cattle identity. And my chapter goes further, challenging the boundaries of these categories and revealing the flexibility of such cultural frontiers.

Rowse unfairly conflates several issues when he refers to my 'attempts to empathise with and give substance to what she sometimes calls

"nostalgia". This denigrates the value of Aboriginal oral traditions and their importance in producing a balanced account of Aboriginal/white relations. Rowse provides no evidence to back his assertion. My acknowledgement of a degree of romanticisation hardly suggests I will swallow such accounts holus-bolus.

Born in the Cattle uses diverse types of Aboriginal oral history in varied ways. Because they provide a wider analytical background from an Aboriginal perspective, some stories can be categorised as 'collective memory' and used in the same way as secondary sources or history texts, or as Aboriginal 'historiology'. They throw up important questions for Aborigines now, questions that, like western historical debates, relate to past and present concerns. Other oral history stories are better analysed as autobiographies, for they tell of individual life experiences and work histories. The two forms merge, and one story may perform both functions simultaneously. Oral histories have thus formed part of the empirical evidence and contributed to the development of the interpretative process.

On one level I agree with Rowse's assertion that my book might be read as a lament by an older generation of Aborigines for a past now gone, but this would be a shallow and selective reading, and one which makes the present more contentious than the past. The book will also be read in other ways, depending on whose voices are remembered most strongly – on which points a reader finds most startling, disturbing or comforting. While incorporating Aboriginal perspectives as part of the evidence and shape of the text (as we commonly do with white Australian perspectives), the final analysis and interpretation are mine, not theirs. I did try to empathise with, to learn about, Aboriginal culture, and to respect their historiological traditions without being uncritical. One of the central questions posed was 'What was cattle station life like for Aborigines?' But while aware of everything I had learnt of their cultural constructs and evaluative criteria, I could not throw out my own – even if I had wanted to.

In apparent contradiction, Rowse later claims that I do not dispute the confidence of non-Aboriginal pastoralists who believe they had a long 'partnership' with Aborigines. Yet chapter 5, 'Tame Blacks? Paternalism and Control', hardly leaves them feeling comfortable. It presents the many inherent tensions in the master/servant relationship, with its frequent collapse and explosions into violence. At the same time, without denying unequal power relations, it was also important to draw attention to the mutual reliance, the necessary give and take, and the cultural convergences that few people who merely visit Aboriginal camps – or however right-mindedly scrutineer for the ALP – could share. If the basis of power relations between Europeans and Aborigines who live or work together could truly be changed, this interdependence need not render Aborigines so vulnerable.

Regarding the Berndts' mid-1940s survey, Rowse wrongly assumes I had full access to it. The Berndts initially refused, arguing it was outside my period of emphasis (pre-1940) and that they intended to publish

themselves. After my second plea, they allowed me to inspect a type-script summary of their findings. Furthermore, as their study was undertaken amidst the dramatic changes wrought by the war and conducted exclusively on Vestey's stations, its use as a source was problematic.

Rowse sets up a dichotomy between the Berndts' 'objective phenomena of infertility, abortion and early death' and the 'subjective culture [McGrath] wishes to bring to light'. This suggests that he is still trapped in the tradition which assumes that tabulated information, especially when collected by people labelled 'scientists' (such as anthropologists) is necessarily 'objective'. My book challenges such a limited mind-set throughout. No matter how 'factual' certain phenomena may appear, they have limited meaning outside their cultural and socio-historical context. Aboriginal yardsticks are crucial to understanding these 'objective' phenomena, yet the Berndts have not bothered to consider them. For example, they should have asked if station women's fertility and abortion rates differed from that of past generations on stations and from those living bush lifestyles.

The Berndts assume that the statistics they gathered can be interpreted as a 'reproductive crisis' and that it was caused by station conditions. While having every reason to believe that Vestey's was an especially stingy company, we cannot discount more widespread disease factors. Surely the police seizure of children from stations (on 'humanitarian' grounds) was also a deterrent to reproduction. Did Aboriginal women deny the existence of these lost children? Such 'subjective' factors left me puzzling about how to interpret this supposedly 'objective' evidence. The Berndts were as much participants in the history of black/white relations in the 1940s as the Aborigines they interviewed. Yet it seems that Rowse is arguing that Aboriginal viewpoints are innately and peculiarly 'subjective'. Is this because they were actors in the drama, because of their culture, or because they were not 'scholars'?

Especially puzzling is Rowse's claim that it is in dealing with the Berndts' 'objective' evidence that the book offers 'its only substantial critique of the colonial relations that followed pacification'. His definition of such relations must be extremely narrow, for this is clearly the book's focus from the second chapter on. It attempts to cross the boundaries of these relationships to depict the vantage of both coloniser and 'colonised', and the intricate fabric of power relations between genders, types of workers, classes, and 'castes'. In so doing, it offers a new model of 'colonial relations' in the northern context.

Elsewhere, Rowse presents points already made in *Born in the Cattle* as though they are fresh insights. For example, the fact that my informants were survivors is already alluded to in several places, especially when particular friendships are discussed, and also in the Appendix: 'They understandably had more satisfactory relationships with whites than those who shun them.' (p. 178)

Similarly, Rowse details more recent developments that have influenced my informants' present understandings. Yet similar points

were already made in my introduction. In several places reference is made to the impact of the Second World War and to more recent factors such as equal wages, mechanisation and fencing (which contributed to a decline in Aboriginal employment) and subsequent actions by employers to push Aborigines off stations. 'Some have been forced to become urban fringe-dwellers, but many resist leaving if they can . . . Very few Aborigines currently own cattle stations.' (p. ix)

Rowse argues that post-war changes initiated by 'humanitarian' government policies dismantled a social order to which the older station workers had grown accustomed. This would suggest they are resistant to change; yet *Born in the Cattle* reveals their flexibility. I do not believe that Aborigines are merely whingers. Today's 'new order' leaves them with less. Before the Second World War, they had incentives to embrace the cattle economy and the station world. Aborigines were able to stay on their own land, with their families and communities; they had prestigious work, and a system of food supply from the station and bush that could fulfil their kinship-based economic system. They had time and motivation to conduct rituals, to travel and fulfil a custodial role, looking after the land and passing on its magic to younger generations. These tangibles cannot be confused with mere 'nostalgia'.

Rowse is correct in stating 'There is no politically innocent position from which to write the history of European colonisation of Aboriginal land and people.' The current situation of northern Aborigines and their desire to own more cattle land are discussed in my book, but an old political badge does not necessarily match a new analysis. Perhaps this explains why Rowse has at one point deduced that I wrote the book to support the requirements of the Land Rights Act, yet later refers fleetingly to an anonymous contingent of 'angry and incredulous readers' amongst supporters of Aboriginal land rights. Does both satisfying and annoying a similar interest group constitute success? My aims were to challenge current interpretations of both left and right, and to write a neglected people into 'mainstream' history, not just as 'victims' but as agents. As I argued in my introduction:

Aboriginal excellence and desire for continuing work in the pastoral industry contradicts the popular image of Aborigines as bludgers and misfits. It also challenges the myth that Aboriginal culture was unable to change; we may think the cattle economy swamped Aborigines, but in fact they have incorporated cattle life into their world, consciously adapting and integrating it. (pp. ix-x)

When author and Aboriginal educationalist Eric Willmot reviewed *Born in the Cattle* in the *Australian*, he did not seem to fear the book's present political effects. He commented that 'It is powerful enough to make us wonder what it is we are celebrating in 1988 and how we should really go about doing that.'

I hope he is right.

NOTES

Ann McGrath, *'Born in the Cattle': Aborigines in Cattle Country*, Allen & Unwin, 1987; R. M. and C. H. Berndt, *End of an Era*, Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, 1987; E. Willmot, 'A Nation's Terrible Truth', *Weekend Australian*, 2-3 Jan, 1988; Ann McGrath, 'History and Land Claims' in Diane Kirkby (ed.), *Law and History*, Vol. 3, La Trobe University, 1987, and "Stories for Country": oral history and Aboriginal land claims', in *Oral History Association of Australia Journal*, No. 9, 1987; H. and F. Morphy, 'The "myths" of Ngalakan history: ideology and images of the past in northern Australia', *Man*, 19, 1985.

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