

Abrogating Responsibility? Vesteys, anthropology and the future of Aboriginal people

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Australia or just a minor intellectual? The authors do address some of these questions, but in my view too briefly.

The book is mostly Australian focused and centred on its themes of Cold War espionage and Aboriginal anthropology. Hence we are only given glimpses of Rose's views of the DDR. At first, he seems to have thought that it was a really existing socialist utopia, and he was a dedicated party communist. Yet near the end of the book, we are informed that he disliked being controlled 'from A to Z' under that Stalinist regime. That tension could have been explored more fruitfully if further material was available on his views and experiences of the DDR regime, but that would have required going beyond the scope of the book.

Overall, this sweeping biography brings to life the global Cold War context, the paranoia on both sides and how this affected one man and his family, as well as anthropological studies of Aborigines. The biography flows excellently. The authors note that the breadth of the subjects they covered in their biography placed them, at times, outside their intellectual comfort zones. They are to be congratulated for weaving together many different subjects. We need more interdisciplinary books with such a broad, global focus, which would highlight the many ways in which the Pacific is interconnected with the rest of the world.

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Abrogating Responsibility? Vestey's, anthropology and the future of Aboriginal people. By Geoffrey Gray. Melbourne, Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2015. xxx + 291 pp., endnotes, bibliog., index. ISBN 978-1-9250-0365-9 (pbk). A\$44.00

Between 1944 and 1946, the two young anthropologists Catherine and Ronald Berndt worked for the Australian Investment Agency, part of the Vestey land-owning empire. Their task was to survey Aboriginal labour and welfare on various Northern Territory pastoral stations and settlements. It was often a frustrating experience, as their priorities mainly concerned the need to improve conditions, while those of their employer were much more about solving a wartime labour shortage. The Berndts travelled over a large area, including Limbunya, Katherine-Manbulloo and Wave Hill. They also went to army Aboriginal settlements at places such as the Daly River. Their detailed report, 'Native labour and welfare in the Northern Territory', was completed in 1946. Despite its importance as a carefully researched applied anthropological study on Aboriginal labour, the Berndts' report was not made publicly available. Only in 1987, when the Berndts were among Australia's most prominent anthropologists, did they include original material from the survey in their 'retrospective study', *End of an Era: Aboriginal labour in the Northern Territory*.

Geoffrey Gray's *Abrogating Responsibility* revisits the Berndts' survey and probes its wider significance. 'Of all the scholarly books written on the cattle industry', Gray writes in his introduction,

End of an Era is the only one which provides an anthropological examination of the workings of cattle stations, a limited one at that, and importantly, from the view of the historian, an eye-witness account of the relations and interactions between the managers of the cattle stations, Aboriginal employees and white employees (p. xxvii).

Yet for many years neither the Berndts' findings nor the well-intentioned efforts of many individuals and organisations brought positive changes to Northern Territory

Aboriginal pastoral industry workers' poor conditions. *Abrogating Responsibility* focuses on that failure. Gray contends that long after World War II, pastoral stations 'continued to abrogate any responsibility for improving the conditions of employment including housing, health and hygiene for Aboriginal workers and use whatever was at hand to maximise their profits' (p. 253).

The book is logically divided into four parts, with chapters within each part. Part I, 'Setting the scene', introduces Vestey's, the principal people and the issues with which they dealt. Attention is given to A.S. Bingle, the Australian Investment Agency's general manager; E.W.P. Chinnery, director of the Northern Territory Native Affairs Branch; A.P. Elkin, professor of anthropology at the University of Sydney; and Elkin's protégés the Berndts. Part II, 'The survey', is a comprehensive analysis of the difficult circumstances in which the Berndts did their research and writing. It describes the remote locations where they conducted much of their fieldwork and the growing tensions between them and Bingle, who they believed was deliberately obstructing them. Part III, 'Opposition', deals with pastoralists' objections to paying wages to and improving living conditions for their Aboriginal employees in spite of increasing pressure and protests from both humanitarian bodies and Aboriginal people. Part IV, 'Aftermath', considers how the 1946 survey report provided evidence regarding the poor conditions of Aboriginal workers and their dependents and discusses the problems the Berndts encountered and their recommendations. Gray also examines the intriguingly elusive history of the report's distribution and why it took such a long time for any version to be published. The epilogue reflects on the survey's long-term consequences and the Aboriginal fight for wage justice.

The book has some small but annoying deficiencies. Unlike *End of an Era*, *Abrogating Responsibility* lacks images (except on its covers) and maps. At the very least, a map like the one in *End of an Era* showing where the Berndts went ought to have been included. Despite his frequent references to the Northern Territory Pastoral Lessees Association, Gray fails to use Ted Ling's 2010 doctoral thesis on the commonwealth government's administration of the Northern Territory pastoral industry, which provides probably the best and fullest account of the association's political activities and influence. The introduction's otherwise helpful explanation of the book's structure does not entirely accord with what follows. Apostrophes are occasionally missing.

For the most part, however, *Abrogating Responsibility* is an impressive effort. It is well organised, attractively produced and clearly written. Observations and conclusions are supported with relevant evidence. Numerous and wide-ranging sources, including many unpublished materials from private and public collections, are used. The book includes an index, source notes and a full bibliography. It provides fascinating details about personalities and places. Gray discusses the relationship between the Northern Territory's pastoral industry and the commonwealth officials and politicians who administered the territory. The characters and motives of the Berndts and other main players such as Bingle and Elkin are analysed. Gray's previous extensive research on the history of Australian social anthropology allows him to situate the Berndts within their discipline. He is correct in claiming that his book is 'about complex moral and ethical dilemmas and failures of the past, which are pertinent to, and have resonance with, policies, interventions and the problematic positioning of Aboriginal people in early twenty-first century Australia' (p. xxvii). For these reasons, the book is a significant contribution to scholarship that deserves a wide readership.

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