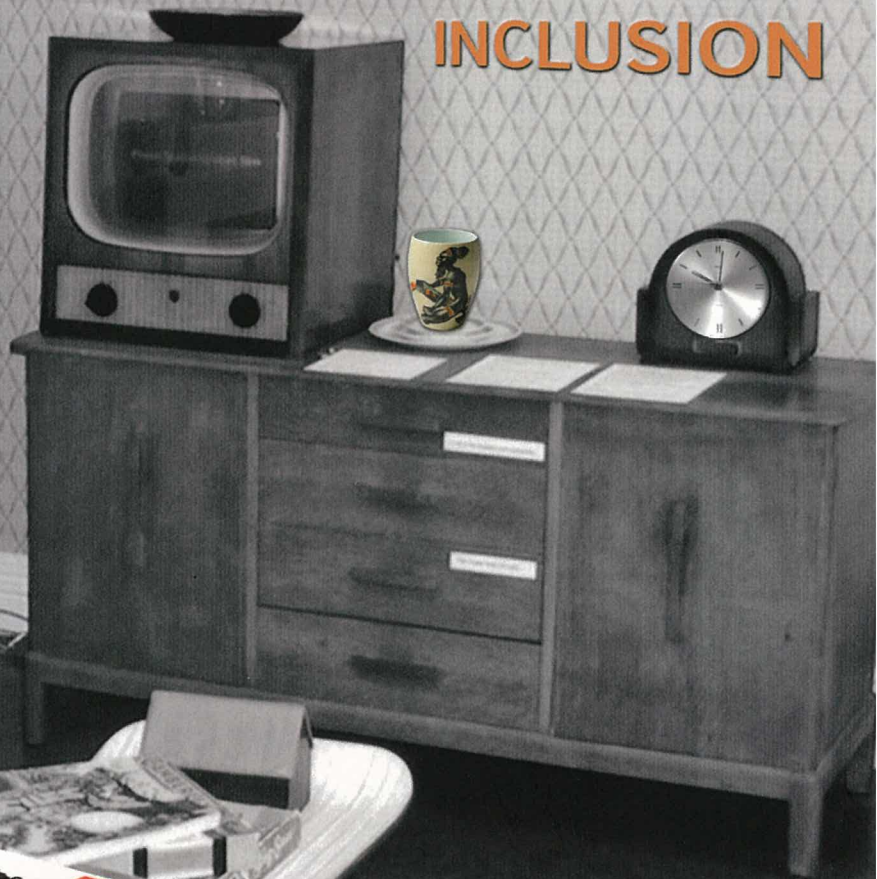


INDIFFERENT INCLUSION



Aboriginal People and
the Australian Nation

Russell McGregor

INDIFFERENT INCLUSION

To my father, Bill McGregor, 1927–2011.

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the Australian Nation

Russell McGregor



Aboriginal
Studies
Press



*The pages of this book are printed on paper derived
from forests promoting sustainable management.*

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Preface

In 1938, while settler Australians celebrated their 150-year occupancy of the continent, Aboriginal activists Jack Patten and Bill Ferguson asserted the claims of the Indigenous inhabitants: 'We ask — and we have every right to *demand* — that you should include us, fully and equally with yourselves, in the body of the Australian nation.'¹ For the next three decades, the quest for national inclusion headed the Aboriginal agenda. As understood at the time, inclusion in the nation entailed more than legal equality, important though that attainment was. It required Aboriginal people to be treated with respect and dignity, to be welcomed as full participants in the life of the community. This book recounts that multifaceted quest for national inclusion up to the early 1970s.

Over that period, inclusiveness of Aboriginal people increased, but inclusion was hesitant, often grudging and always incomplete. Against their acceptance as members of the nation stood a formidable array of assumptions and prejudices. Most of all, inclusion was inhibited by the sheer indifference of settler Australians. The fate of a tiny Indigenous minority, burdened with a plethora of negative stereotypes, was for the majority a matter of little consequence.

Yet public attitudes did shift, and exposition of those shifts takes my narrative beyond the narrowly political domain of parliaments, policies and protests. Adopting a broader canvas, this book explores the ways in which factors such as demonstrations of Aboriginal artistic talents and sporting prowess contributed to the acceptance of Aboriginal people into the national community, even as acceptance was compromised by entrenched assumptions of Indigenous ineptness. Acceptance, it must be conceded, is a rather amorphous achievement, and it is impossible to precisely calibrate the degree of acceptance at a particular point in time. Nonetheless, broad indicators of the level of acceptance, and of the willingness of the majority to extend acceptance, can be extrapolated from the historical record.

Social inclusion still retains positive connotations in Aboriginal affairs. Not so for another term that was commonly used to designate that process in the period under consideration: 'assimilation'. Today, assimilation is commonly demonised as little more than an attempt to destroy Aboriginal cultures and provide spurious justification for child theft. That the cultural destruction and child removals took place is not in question, but the meanings of assimilation were not exhausted by these practices, which were in fact opposed by many assimilationists. In the middle decades of the twentieth century, the word 'assimilation' encompassed a wide range of proposals for securing an Aboriginal future, and drew support from an equally diverse array of people — both Indigenous and non-Indigenous. To understand the prominence and credibility of assimilation at the time, we must look beyond the governmental policies and practices that went under the 'assimilation' label. 'Assimilation' was analogous to the more recent slogan in Indigenous affairs, 'reconciliation', with both words being interpreted and inflected in myriad, often discordant, ways and both denoting far more than merely the actions or ambitions of governments. One of the purposes of this book is to promote a more nuanced understanding of what assimilation meant in mid-twentieth-century Australia.²

I do not attempt to convey the lived reality of how Aboriginal people experienced their exclusion from, or inclusion in, the Australian nation. Exposition of those experiences may best be left to Indigenous writers. Nor do I attempt to offer a comprehensive account of the incremental changes in legislation by which Aboriginal people acquired formal legal equality. That has already been done by others.³ Rather, I seek to elucidate the ideas and ideals that propelled the quest for Aboriginal inclusion in the nation in the middle decades of the twentieth century, the impediments to that quest and its stumbling successes. This is a book about the transformation of the Australian nation as it made faltering steps to come to grips with the endurance of the Indigenous people and as Indigenous people themselves strove to secure a place within the nation.

To illuminate the changing texture of Australian nationhood, the concepts of civic and ethnic nationalism are helpful. Ethnic nationalisms put a premium on blood kinship as the primary tie of community, and assume an organic connection between culture and biological ancestry. Civic nationalisms, on the other hand, emphasise shared rights, responsibilities and values as the foundations of national cohesion. However,

as the prominent British scholar Anthony Smith argues, the distinction between them — while analytically useful — is never absolute. No nationalism is purely one or the other; all are compounded of both civic and ethnic elements, though in varying degrees and proportions that typically change over time.⁴ Australian nationalism at the beginning of the twentieth century was strongly ethnic in orientation, flaunted in its celebration of whiteness as the key criterion of national membership. Over the course of the century, the ethnic elements were diluted by a stronger stress on civic attributes, promoting a more open conception of Australian nationhood. However, the door was never more than partially ajar.

The legacy this book traces is an ambiguous one. Over the middle decades of the twentieth century, Aboriginal people were incrementally, though incompletely, incorporated into the national community. Inclusion was always conditional, and the dominant group — settler Australians — set the terms of inclusion. Although settler Australians have in the past balked at opening their hearts and minds to the full inclusion of Aboriginal people in the Australian nation, I hope the light this book sheds on the tentative steps of the past will encourage a greater openness in the future.

Notes on Terminology

Throughout this book, I use terms such as ‘half-caste’, ‘full-blood’, ‘mixed-blood’ and ‘part-Aboriginal’. Although these terms, and the distinctions they impute, are today widely regarded with distaste — even repugnance — this was not the case in the period under discussion. Then, words such as ‘half-caste’ and ‘full-blood’ were used by, among others, Aboriginal people as terms of self-designation. Moreover, they were terms that made distinctions which were meaningful and consequential in the context of their times. Hence, they cannot be avoided in historical works seeking to understand the world of people in the past. In the following chapters, I use these words without quotation marks, except in quotation or, as in the first sentence of this paragraph, where the words themselves rather than their referents are under consideration. The same principle applies to my use of other, heavily value-laden words such as ‘progress’, ‘advancement’, ‘primitive’ and ‘civilised’. The absence of quotation marks in no way indicates endorsement of the hierarchies they impute.

The word ‘Aboriginal’ is less problematic, but not entirely free of complications. In the period under consideration, it was commonly used to refer to all the Indigenous inhabitants of Australia — that is, it was inclusive of Torres Strait Islanders. Sometimes, specification of the latter group was added, as in the case of the Federal Council for Aboriginal Advancement (FCAA), founded in 1958, which changed its name to the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders (FCAATSI) in 1964. The combination term, ‘Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander’, was more prevalent in Queensland than elsewhere, and its level of usage rose somewhat towards the end of the period covered by this book. However, it was not standard usage at the time. Following contemporary convention, I often use the word ‘Aboriginal’ to encompass all Indigenous Australians, but vary this usage as seems appropriate.

Abbreviations and Acronyms

AAAS	Australasian Association for the Advancement of Science
AAF	Aboriginal-Australian Fellowship
AAF records	Records of the Aboriginal-Australian Fellowship, Mitchell Library, ms. 4057
AAL	Australian Aborigines' League
AALSA	Aborigines Advancement League of South Australia
ABC	Australian Broadcasting Commission
ABM	Australian Board of Missions
ACC	Australian Council of Churches
AFASA	Aborigines' Friends' Association of South Australia
AIATSIS	Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies
ANZAAS	Australian and New Zealand Association for the Advancement of Science
APA	Aborigines Progressive Association
ARPNC	AR Pilling newspaper clippings, AIATSIS, ms. 3511
AWB	Aborigines Welfare Board of New South Wales
Bonner papers	Papers of Neville Bonner, National Library of Australia, ms. 7903
Bryant papers	Papers of Gordon Bryant, National Library of Australia, ms. 8256
CARV	Council for Aboriginal Rights, Victoria
Christophers papers	Papers of Barry Christophers, National Library of Australia, ms. 7992

Abbreviations and Acronyms

Cleland collection	JB Cleland Collection, South Australian Museum Anthropology Archives, AA60, Acc. 238
<i>CPD</i>	<i>Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates</i>
<i>CPP</i>	<i>Commonwealth Parliamentary Papers</i>
Duguid papers	Papers of Charles Duguid, National Library of Australia, ms. 5068
Elkin papers	Archives of Professor AP Elkin, University of Sydney Archives, P130
FCAA	Federal Council for Aboriginal Advancement
FCAATSI	Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders
FCAATSI records	Records of the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders, Mitchell Library, ms. 2999
Hasluck papers	Papers of Sir Paul Hasluck, National Library of Australia, ms. 5274
NAA	National Archives of Australia
NADOC	National Aborigines Day Observance Committee
NADOC records	Records of the National Aborigines' Day Observance Committee, National Library of Australia, ms. 3677
NLA	National Library of Australia
NMC	National Missionary Council of Australia
NT	Northern Territory
NTCAR	Northern Territory Council for Aboriginal Rights
PM	Prime Minister
<i>QPP</i>	<i>Queensland Parliamentary Papers</i>
SAMAA	South Australian Museum Anthropology Archives
Simpson papers	Papers of Colin Simpson, National Library of Australia, ms. 5253
<i>SMH</i>	<i>Sydney Morning Herald</i>
Street papers	Paper of Lady Jessie Street, National Library of Australia, ms. 2683
VAAL	Victorian Aborigines Advancement League
VAG	Victorian Aboriginal Group