Assimilating Australia

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Jennifer Clark: Aborigines and Activism: Race, Aborigines and the Coming of the Sixties to Australia (University of Western Australia Press, ISBN 9780980296570, $35.95)


At the beginning of the 1960s, Australia’s now infamous assimilation policy was at its high point. Designed in the immediate postwar era to divest Aborigines and non-English-speaking migrants of their own cultures in order to transform them into Anglo-Celtic citizens, it was founded on the twin policies of White Australia and postwar migration and framed by the rhetoric of the Cold War. Actively promoted by both major political parties as a practical way of adapting to the dramatic social changes in postwar Australia, the policy enjoyed unprecedented support from academics, social critics and the media, although a number did question whether it could actually work.

By the end of the 1960s, the policy was in tatters. The three books reviewed here explore, in different and important ways, its origins and demise. Anna Haebich focuses on ‘imaginings of assimilation’ in the 1950s and 1960s: in particular, how assimilation was constructed by government, how it was sold to the nation at large and how it impacted on the groups it was designed to transform. Jennifer Clark explores its national dimensions and international implications within the framework of radical protest, and the Aboriginal contributors to Heartsick for Country record their own experiences of grappling with assimilation’s most destructive features.

Anna Haebich is the first scholar to explore the impact of assimilation on the two groups of people it was designed to transform – Aborigines and non-English-speaking postwar migrants. As she points out, the policy was originally designed in response to international pressures to meet the new expectations of modern nationhood. It was heralded as the mechanism to sweep away racial and cultural differences and divisions, and to absorb all Australians – Indigenous, settler and immigrant – as equal citizens sharing a common way of life. As Haebich notes, ‘while the vision of assimilation fitted international imperatives of opposition to racism against minority groups, the paradox is that its promise of universal equality came at the price of their cultural obliteration’.

In teasing out and comparing variations in what she calls ‘assimilatory pressures of nation building’ on Aborigines and non-English-speaking immigrants, Haebich exposes the traditions of preferential treatment of settler Australians and new British immigrants, established earlier in the twentieth century and continued on in the new White Australia of the 1950s and 1960s. She also reveals how Aboriginal disadvantage was compounded by government failure to extend to Aborigines the economic benefits that were boosting the material prosperity of other families around the nation.

The government, she argues, never really believed that Aborigines would ever be ‘ready’ for assimilation. She demonstrates this awful fact in a case study of the policy’s impact on the Nyungar community in the south-west of Western Australia. The community was dispersed, their children removed, then refused education and training for jobs in mainstream society and excluded from proper housing. Denied the economic and social benefits of the postwar boom, the Nyungar people have never recovered even today.

On the other hand, the government believed that postwar non-English-speaking migrants could be made ‘ready’ to join Anglo-Celtic Australia, but only after their professional qualifications were rejected and they had served a long period of displacement in menial jobs, often in remote areas where they were separated from their families.

For both groups, Haebich concludes, the impact of the ‘dream of assimilation’ was to crush their spirit. While some migrants had more government support, and an expectation that they would eventu-
Annually become part of postwar White Australia, many lost their hopes – and in some cases even their minds. She cautions us not to overlook the fact that many migrants simply didn’t make it. This is an almost overwhelming book, breathtaking in its depth of coverage of so many aspects of the policy and the way it was conceived and carried out. Haebich has stamped her mark on the field of assimilation studies and taken it in new directions.

Jennifer Clark investigates the assimilation policy within an international context of radical protest in the 1960s. She begins with an analysis of the Australian government’s response to the Sharpeville massacre in South Africa in March 1960. Since South Africa was a member of the British Commonwealth, the Australian government was reluctant to condemn the incident, on the grounds that it was a domestic matter. Other members thought otherwise. They were in no doubt that the South African government had abrogated the human rights of its black subjects and, to Australia’s astonishment, forced South Africa to quit the Commonwealth. The Australian government was even more astonished when it was requested to respond to a letter sent by an Australian woman to President Nkrumah of Ghana, asking that the position of Aborigines be placed on the agenda of the next Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting.

Having been served notice, so to speak, that Australia was expected to observe the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights which it had signed in 1948, and put its own house in order, the government began to quietly change some of the more discriminatory aspects of the assimilation policy. But it was too slow and too late. In misreading the winds of change in relation to human rights it enabled new activists at home like radical Christian groups, the New Left and Black Power organisations to seize the political initiative. The chapters on the emergence of these groups and how they developed their campaigns and devised their strategies drawn from the civil rights and Black Power movements in the United States offer new insights into the significance of international issues on Australian politics at a time when the government could only perceive the world through the lens of the Cold War. According to Clark, the clash between activists and an intransigent government came to a head at the Tent Embassy in Canberra in 1972. By then, she writes, ‘Parliament had, in many ways, become a House of response to the politics of the people’, rather than an agent of change. With extensive archival research of government policy documents and the men who forged them, Clark presents a lively and insightful account of a government in denial about the policy’s inherent racism and its unwillingness to acknowledge its international obligations to its own people. She also shows how it was spooked by the activism of the new protest movements and how, in trying to repress them, it lost its own credibility.

The great strength of this terrific book is the way it captures the language and thinking of the time, transporting the reader back to the 1960s, not with nostalgia but with a critical eye to understanding the past.

The contributors to Sally Morgan, Tjalaminu Mia and Blaze Kwaymullina’s collection also reveal how Aborigines lost out from the assimilation policy. The book should have been sub-titled ‘Painful Memories of Assimilation’ because most of the contributors tell of their experiences of trying to recover their sense of self, place and community that were ripped from them in the assimilation period. While the quality of the contributions varies considerably, for most, simply putting words on the page is an act of faith. They make for painful reading. However, the brilliantly crafted contribution by Bill Jonas, one of the few Aborigines who went to university in the assimilation period and who later became Social Justice Commissioner, stands out. His personal and intellectual journey to his home town in the Upper Hunter Valley to recover a hidden puzzle of his Aboriginal childhood poignantly reveals the pain of dispossession and assimilation. His parents never revealed their Aboriginality, in order to let him access the white world. But the emotional pain of cultural loss is overwhelming.

If anyone ever imagined that assimilation had positive effects, these books readily dispel its rosy glow. They also provide important and useful insights into the present-day spin on national policies for Aborigines and immigrants on initiatives promoting citizenship, values training and mainstreaming of government services. They didn’t work in the 1950s and 1960s, and are even less likely to work now.

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