

TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

Stephen Gray, *The Protectors: a Journey through Whitefella Past* (Allen & Unwin, 2011)

I picked up this book for review just as I started working on a research paper about Herbert Basedow, the South Australian medical doctor, anthropologist, and, for a few short months in 1911, the first Commonwealth Chief Protector of Aborigines in the Northern Territory. As it turned out, Basedow merits only the most passing mention in legal scholar and novelist Stephen Gray's book (a 'swaggering, self-aggrandising, self-confident German nearly two metres tall,' whose 'most memorable' contribution to the Territory's Aboriginal policy was the recommendation that Aborigines be tattooed for identification [54-55]). Having expected a history of the Territory's Chief Protectors, along the lines of Tony Austin's *Never Trust a Government Man*, or even Pat Jacobs' biography of A.O. Neville, I quickly found that the book was quite different from what I had imagined.

The book is, indeed, structured along a historical narrative, the chapters loosely based upon the men who held positions of power in some capacity or another in the Territory's convoluted administration of Aboriginal affairs. The second Protector, 'compromiser' Baldwin Spencer, whom Gray argues had genocidal visions if not aims, is contrasted to the 'idealist' Inspector J.T. Beckett; Gray moves next on to Cecil Cook, and Cook's contemporary Xavier Herbert who for a time managed the Kahlin compound in Darwin, discussing, at the same time, the Cubillo-Gunner case for compensation for their removal at that time. Gray then looks at the missionaries, and their complex, paternalistic attitudes towards Aboriginal people. Two further chapters cover Paul Hasluck and Harry Giese, and then Colin Macleod, a former Patrol Officer involved in child removal cases. The penultimate chapter focuses on the 'fall' of Giese, and generally the problems entailed in the writing of this history, and the conclusion is then a reflection on the nature of history, and upon the issues around genocide, complicity and accountability. There are no footnotes, although the interested lay reader will find useful guides for further reading in the chapter-by-chapter discussion of sources provided at the back of the book. For those who are already familiar with the history, the book is thought-provoking and engaging, while those who aren't will find it an accessible introduction.

But the central concern of *The Protectors* is not to bring to light new research nor to analyse the ins-and-outs of what each man did and what policies were carried out under each regime. Instead, these rather literary sketches of the individual men who shaped Aboriginal policy provide Stephen Gray with the opportunity to reflect on contemporary issues of white Australia's response to this history, and how we judge previous generations in light of what we understand of race relations between Indigenous and white settler Australians today. Particularly, Gray grapples with the equivocation of 'mainstream' Australia today with the Apology to the Stolen Generations; and with how to deal with the problem of 'good intentions' in past government policy, that defence mounted by those who feel criticism of such past Aboriginal policies amounts to unwarranted and unjust attacks, and one which often confounds white Australians seeking to understand how just how such oppressive policies as forcible child removal came about, and persisted, in the first place. It speaks, also, though less directly, to the confusion many white Australians feel today

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on the issue of the current government Intervention in Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory.

Gray's writing is lucid and light, and occasionally poetic. He writes directly to the reader, sharing his personal reflections and thoughts. Gray's underpinning motif is the way that white Australians have imbibed, more or less unconsciously, the casual yet bleakly violent poison of anti-Aboriginal racism over generations that makes them practically impervious to pleas for empathy with Aboriginal people. At the same time, he returns, repeatedly, to the anxiety induced in white Australians by excoriating their elders who supported, endorsed or carried out government policies, or as Gray puts it, 'spitting on' them and their legacies.

As the subtitle suggests, the book is really about 'whitefellas,' and it is directed squarely towards a white, middle-class, urban Australian audience. 'So what, in the face of all this,' writes Gray (having spent some time dwelling on the agonizing spectacle of Aboriginal misery in present-day Darwin), 'is the well-informed, well-educated, well-meaning non-Aboriginal person to do?' (50). Gray introduces us early to the dinner-table conversations that go on between the generations in his own family. We get the sense that the book is written to explain 'our' (as in white Australia's) generations to each other, in an effort to resolve 'our' differences and realise the way forward. The very framing of the question Gray asks aptly represents what is indeed shared between the critical younger white generations and their 'well-intentioned' elders, this sense of an imperative to intervene and to 'do something'.

Clearly, Gray does not want to write a diatribe on the issue of Stolen Generations. His repeatedly stated concern is with 'understanding' the perpetrators of these policies, without forgiving, or castigating, them. Gray draws correlations between the issues surrounding Holocaust histories, and the issues surrounding white Australians' critical interrogation of those who directed and carried out Aboriginal policy. He points, for example, to Schlink's controversial novel, *The Reader*, to support his contention that the 'whole truth must be faced – even where it includes elements that do not fit with our preconceived image' (207). Such comparisons may offend some readers, and irritate some historians. However, Gray does succeed in highlighting the more nuanced insights of the work that has been carried out since the 1990s in Indigenous cross-cultural histories, which has sadly not tended to reach popular history and current affairs. And the book seems likely to reach the audience for whom it is written, and may well shift some entrenched presumptions and blind spots. But those who want to get a deeper understanding of the present-day white Australian anxieties that surround the history of Aboriginal and white relations, and an understanding of why the so-called History Wars became so toxic at the turn of the twenty-first century, should probably ensure that they read it.

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