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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# 'Little Gunshots, but with the blaze of lightning': Xavier Herbert, Visuality and Human Rights

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## Abstract

Xavier Herbert published his bestseller *Capricornia* in 1938, following two periods spent in the Northern Territory. His next major work, *Poor Fellow My Country* (1975), was not published until thirty-seven years later, but was also set in the north during the 1930s. One significant difference between the two novels is that by 1975 photo-journalism had become a significant force for influencing public opinion and reforming Aboriginal policy. Herbert's novel, centring upon Prindy as vulnerable Aboriginal child, marks a sea change in perceptions of Aboriginal people and their place in Australian society, and a radical shift toward use of photography as a means of revealing the violation of human rights after World War II. In this article I review Herbert's visual narrative strategies in the context of debates about this key historical shift and the growing impact of photography in human rights campaigns. I argue that *Poor Fellow My Country* should be seen as a textual re-enactment, set in Herbert's and the nation's past, yet coloured by more recent social changes that were facilitated and communicated through the camera's lens. Like all re-enactments, it is written in the past conditional: it asks, what if things had been different? It poses a profound challenge to the state project of scientific modernity that was the Northern Territory over the first decades of the twentieth century.

## Keywords

**Xavier Herbert; literary re-enactments; *Capricornia*; *Poor Fellow My Country*; photography and human rights**

## Poor Fellow My Country as the projective past

In this article I explore some of the literary strategies and visual tropes that structure Xavier Herbert's 1975 novel, *Poor Fellow My Country*, and which express his engagement with new ideas about rights and visibility. Herbert is often described as 'ahead of his time' in his concern with the plight of Aboriginal people. *Poor Fellow My Country* followed thirty-seven years after his *Capricornia*, published in 1938, yet echoes the themes and settings of the earlier novel—both novels attempted to expose the hypocrisy and injustice of the treatment of Aboriginal people especially in the north. However, I argue that it also reflects many shifts in seeing and representing race relations that had taken place during the intervening years. Ultimately, I suggest *Poor Fellow My Country* should be seen as a textual re-enactment, set in Herbert's and the nation's past, yet coloured by more recent social changes that were facilitated and communicated through the camera's lens. Like all re-enactments, the novel is written in the past conditional: it asks, what if things had been different?

There are strong similarities between these two great milestones in Herbert's career. In each novel Herbert explores themes of hybrid identity and especially, as Russell McDougall notes, sexual relations between white men and Aboriginal women in the tropics.<sup>1</sup> Herbert's fascination was originally prompted by an international literary genre concerned with interracial sex in West Africa.<sup>2</sup> Unusually in the Australian context, Herbert suggested that mixed descent was not a liability but rather promoted a multicultural or hybrid future for Australia. In addition, Herbert's novels are infused with a profound anger, somewhat tempered by cynicism, concerning the injustice and degradation meted out to Aboriginal people. Xavier Herbert published his bestseller *Capricornia* in 1938, following two periods spent in the Northern Territory.<sup>3</sup> At the time *Capricornia* was published, Herbert had been, if only briefly, an active participant in events in the Northern Territory; he was subsequently to return and work as Acting Superintendent of Darwin's Kahlin Compound for 'half-caste' children for eight months in 1935–36, where, working with his friend Val McGinness, he had tried to improve conditions for residents.<sup>4</sup> By the time of his second novel's publication, however, Herbert had not been directly involved in the town's affairs for some decades. He was discharged from the AIF in 1944, and after the war he and his wife, Sadie, settled at Redlynch near Cairns in North Queensland, where he continued to write.<sup>5</sup>

A comparison of the two novels is instructive in revealing their shared concerns as well as significant differences. *Capricornia* was Herbert's first fictional account of life in the Northern Territory, set in 1904 when the brothers Oscar and Mark Shillingsworth arrive in Port Zodiac (Darwin) on the coast of Capricornia, to take up positions in the civil service. Oscar takes to his new life and prospers, becoming the owner of cattle station Red Ochre. Mark is dismissed for drunkenness, and consorts with the local riff-raff, such as fishermen and Aboriginal people. He fathers a son, Norman ('Nawnim', or 'no-name'), by an Aboriginal woman named Marowallua and leaves him for the Aboriginal community to rear—until the boy is eventually taken in by his uncle. Oscar tells 'yeller-feller' Norman that he is the son of a Javanese princess in an attempt to shelter him from the North's racism. Norman's struggle to find a place in the world becomes the central theme of the novel, and so embodies the complexities of interracial relations in the tropics of the 1930s.<sup>6</sup>

This period, of course, almost coincided with the Commonwealth Government's assumption of control of the Northern Territory in January 1911, and the development of its notorious architecture of racial segregation. Renaming the new capital from Palmerston to

Darwin in honour of the famous British naturalist marked the new administration's aspiration towards the scientific modernism that underlay its harsh policies of tropical apartheid. These ideas are perhaps most well known through the work of anthropologist and biologist Walter Baldwin Spencer, who was appointed to Darwin during 1912 as Special Commissioner and Chief Protector of Aborigines. Spencer played an important role in shaping ideas about Australian Aboriginal people and their culture, including through his innovative and effective use of visual media, and is often considered to embody the link between disciplinary knowledge and state power through his influential position as scientific authority on Aboriginal people.<sup>7</sup> Although its originality and influence has been greatly overstated, Spencer's infamous 1913 report to the Minister of External Affairs marked the inception of an era of growing legislative and administrative restriction over Aboriginal lives, especially those defined as 'half-castes', that shaped Herbert's interwar experience. Spencer's 1913 report echoes the views and recommendations of a number of predecessors who since the 1890s had been arguing against interracial relations and especially contact between Aboriginal people and 'Asiatics' in the north.<sup>8</sup> The report made wide-reaching recommendations for control over the Aboriginal population's movement, and was especially obsessed with segregation—of Aboriginal people from 'Asiatics', of 'half-castes' from 'wild' Aboriginal people, and undesirable whites from Aboriginal.<sup>9</sup> Herbert was well placed to observe the policy's effects, especially through his friendship with the Kungarakan McGinness family, whose mixed race children were taken into custody by the Aboriginal Protection Society and one of whose children, Val, was the real-life prototype for Norman and Prindy.<sup>10</sup> In this way Herbert's advocacy of 'miscegenation' in both *Capricornia* and *Poor Fellow My Country* challenged the fundamental principles of this state project.<sup>11</sup>

By contrast with the more immediate personal experiences that grounded his first novel, *Poor Fellow My Country* is set in Herbert's own past, and re-enacts the events, people and places he experienced as a much younger man. In this second novel, events centre upon Jeremy Delacy and his illegitimate 'creamy' grandson Prindy in the years leading up to World War II. Many themes are shared with the earlier work, including race and its policing in the tropical north, the place of Indigenous Australians and national identity. It can be understood as a form of literary re-enactment—like all representation, a narrative composed in reiteration.<sup>12</sup> Temporality has long been a concern of postcolonial scholars, who have pointed to colonialism's reliance upon notions of the *belatedness* of the non-European world, and challenged this assumption through alternative conceptions of history and culture.<sup>13</sup> Rather than seeing history as periods or linear sequences that inevitably and systematically created coherent structures of nation and empire, such work instead reimagines temporality through the contextual reception, hybridisation and refraction of narratives, events and practices.<sup>14</sup> This insight has demonstrated the inseparability of modernity from colonialism, fuelling the concern of 'new transnational history' to bring metropolis and colony into a single analytical framework.<sup>15</sup>

Re-enactments prompt a means of temporal framing that Anja Schwartz has termed the 'past conditional'—that is, what would they have done? What if?<sup>16</sup> In exploring a range of recent re-enactment forms, such as reality TV, Vanessa Agnew points out that historical re-enactments offer many insights into the nature of contemporary historical discourse and the presentist agendas that shape them.<sup>17</sup> A substantial literature has sprung up around re-enactments as live performances, and particularly film and television forms. In some versions, historical reality television programs such as *Outback House* may function to confirm the link

between settler Australians and their continent, authenticating popular settler fantasies of the past, and producing an understanding of colonial history as always already settled.<sup>18</sup>

Significantly, in arguing for a performative concept of reconciliation, Schwartz suggests that notions of ‘working through’ and ‘healing’ entail the narrative closure of hurtful pasts in dangerous ways: they produce narratives of reconciliation in which the violence of the past shows up as ‘a mere error’, a ‘lapse that needs to be redressed but does not upset the teleological narrative of history as progress’.<sup>19</sup> In re-imagining relations between Indigenous and settler, between the past and the present, films and television may sometimes have the troubling effect of severing the past from the present. Films such as *The Tracker*, which exaggerates colonial evil to create a sense of distance from our own time and mores has this effect: despite its narrative, visual, and filmic complexity, *The Tracker* employs the strategy of creating white settler characters that are so wicked and vicious we can comfortably dismiss them from our own frame of reference, effecting closure for white viewers.<sup>20</sup> Ultimately, Schwartz endorses a path toward reconciliation that is procedural rather than prescriptive—the transformative power of the re-enactment lies not in communally working through trauma, but in enunciating a new voice and questioning any unified account of the past.

However, in Herbert’s re-enactment of race relations in 1930s Darwin there is little in the way of healing. In part this is attributable to Herbert’s excoriating depiction of race relations in the north, and his refusal to provide happy endings for his many unjustly treated Indigenous characters. Significantly, however, by adopting the past conditional narrative mode, Herbert’s re-telling of old stories, reimagined through the lens of more recent political developments and visual technologies, undoes the linear, progressive temporality of modernity. This is what postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha terms the ‘time lag’, a hybrid postcolonial moment of delay between the signifier and the signified which effects a space of relative autonomy for the activist subject.<sup>21</sup> This postcolonial ‘enunciative present’ provides a sense of possibility, of alternatives and choices, and reveals the artificiality of modernity’s temporal rhythms. Bhabha argues:

Without the postcolonial time-lag the discourse of modernity cannot, I believe, be written; with the projective past it can be inscribed as a historical narrative of alterity that explores forms of social antagonism and contradiction that are not yet properly represented, political identities in the process of being formed, cultural enunciations in the act of hybridity in the process of translating and transvaluing cultural differences.<sup>22</sup>

The postcolonial time lag has implications for colonial myths of progress, premised on the relentless forward sweep of linear time, and Bhabha argues that texts characterised by the postcolonial time-lag produce a form of repetition that establishes ‘the past as projective’. In the *projective past* the time-lag of postcolonial modernity moves forward, erasing that compliant past tethered to the myth of progress. However, ‘this forward is neither teleological nor is it an endless slippage’: it is the function of the lag to slow down the linear, progressive time of modernity to reveal its ‘gesture’, its rhythms, ‘the pauses and stresses of the whole performance’.<sup>23</sup> In Herbert’s complex, multiple plotlines, his exaggerated, frequently carnivalesque, even grotesque characters and vignettes, the past is retold through the eyes of the 1960s, imposing a newer activist consciousness upon pre-war tensions and injustice.

## A universal language of human rights? 1945–1960

Among the major events and social changes that intervened between the two novels were the outbreak and conclusion of World War II, the adjustments and optimism of the 1950s, and the

turmoil and activism of the 1960s. After the war, images quickly became integral to demands for human rights and decolonisation around the world. In particular, the confluence of new photojournalist technologies and the atrocity of conflict gave photographic imagery of trauma and violence unprecedented power, and a visual culture developed that increasingly valued photographic evidence for distant suffering.<sup>24</sup>

In December 1948 the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) was proclaimed, and the UN's cultural arm, UNESCO, sought to harness the 'universal language' of photography to communicate the new system of principles. This new legal and ethical framework was communicated through a range of visual narratives that sought to create a sense of a universal humanity and a shared global culture through picturing 'unity in diversity'. As Article 1 of UNESCO's constitution stated, it would collaborate in the 'work of advancing the mutual knowledge and understanding of peoples, through all means of mass communication and to that end recommend such international agreements as may be necessary to promote the free flow of ideas by word and image'.<sup>25</sup> The league's aim to create world citizenship through education, symbolised by its slogan 'One World in the things of the mind and spirit', also underpinned the UN and UNESCO's faith in the 'universal power of knowledge'.

Photography became a major means of furthering UNESCO's goals to overcome barriers of nation, language and illiteracy. The medium was already the basis of new forms of mass communication that had emerged during the 1940s, in the form of photo-books, exhibitions, magazines and other ephemera.<sup>26</sup> Perhaps the most well known of these projects was the 1955 photographic exhibition, 'The Family of Man', curated by Edward Steichen for New York's Museum of Modern Art. Steichen explained that 'The Family of Man' aimed to illustrate the 'essential oneness of mankind throughout the world', mirroring mankind back to himself.<sup>27</sup> Critiques of the 'The Family of Man' focused on its universalising aspirations that effaced differences of race and class, as well as its complicity with American cold war liberalism.<sup>28</sup> But already in 1949 UNESCO had pioneered this humanist photographic narrative, mounting an exhibition at the Palais Galleria in Paris designed 'to convey a compelling visual history of human rights' and disseminate the abstract contents of the UDHR through a display of photographs, images, documents and objects.<sup>29</sup>

Yet alongside a harmonious vision of a shared global culture, a much older narrative of 'struggle' revealed violence and atrocity.<sup>30</sup> The image of the chained African slave, the logo of the British anti-slavery movement from the early nineteenth century, was subsequently taken up by diverse causes: for example, between 1904–1912 the Congo Reform Association had made successful use of magic lantern slide performances featuring this motif to reveal the atrocities entailed by King Leopold of Belgium's regime.<sup>31</sup> While much of the exhibition presages the familial imagery of 'The Family of Man' in its depiction of a shared way of life, a counter-narrative of atrocity is introduced through scenes of war such as soldiers washed ashore on a beach, a heap of corpses at Buchenwald, and book-burning. Of course, the strategy of revealing the *violation* of human rights has been integral to the humanitarian narrative since at least the eighteenth century. Just as long-standing has been a critique of the distancing and disempowering effects of such images upon those represented, against others who insist upon the importance of revealing the violation of rights in order to effect change.<sup>32</sup> Some scholars argue that rights are *only* visible in their violation: for example Gayatri Spivak suggests: 'The word rights ... acquires verbal meaning by its contiguity with the word wrongs', noting 'the verb to right cannot be used intransitively on this level of abstraction. It can only be used with the unusual noun wrong: "to right a wrong", or "to right wrongs"'.<sup>33</sup> Following this logic,



as some historians have argued, atrocity images that show the violation of human rights are fundamental to our understanding of human rights.<sup>34</sup> The 1949 UN exhibition can be seen to mark the first deliberate and systematic use of atrocity imagery to picture the new concept of human rights through violation, and to counterpose this against the humanist conception of a shared human history, culture and identity.

These tensions also characterise the representation of Australian Aboriginal people after World War II, as new notions of rights and the evils of racism began to circulate, and Aboriginal people became more visible to mainstream Australia. Assimilation policies were implemented, and a welfare movement emerged that was focused upon improving the domestic environment of Aboriginal people as a means of social uplift. While assimilation is now seen as a coercive, usually top-down intervention in Aboriginal lives, we should also acknowledge the utopian, universalising aspirations that underpinned its formulation.<sup>35</sup> A graphic visual language of degradation and suffering was applied to rural Aboriginal camps by politicians, Aboriginal activists and white social workers to argue for intervention and reform. This visual discourse of abjection drew from the genres of concentration camp photography and an older tradition of urban slum imagery. Sometimes observers explicitly compared their living conditions with Nazi imagery; for example, in referring to Aboriginal people living in 'second-class concentration camps'.<sup>36</sup> It is worth noting that *Poor Fellow My Country* also makes frequent reference to Nazis as the embodiment of evil, and portrays Jewish characters such as the beautiful Rifkah as damaged but transcendent, ennobled by their extreme suffering.

The new postwar visual culture also drew upon imagery of urban squalor, and the long-established tradition of 'slummer' journalism, that re-emerged in Australian cities such as Melbourne after the war, led by reformers seeking to promote the ideal family and reaffirm middle-class values.<sup>37</sup> However, just as this urban tradition had been characterised by a tendency to assign blame to the poor, images showing Aboriginal people living in degrading conditions such as 'fringe' camps was often construed as evidence for primitivism rather than a consequence of disadvantage. As Aboriginal leader Pastor Doug Nicholls noted in his slogan, 'Australian Aborigines are not a primitive people but a people living in primitive conditions'.<sup>38</sup> These revitalised visual narratives gave force to postwar attempts to improve Aboriginal living conditions and opportunities.

## The 1960s

By the 1960s, global visual media facilitated Australian participation in many international movements, such as the March 1960 Sharpeville massacre, when South African police opened fire on black anti-apartheid demonstrators, prompting international outrage.<sup>39</sup> Black-and-white photos of scattered corpses documented the bleak aftermath and focused attention on indigenous treatment around the world.<sup>40</sup> Australians also watched racial clashes in the United States of America over these years, as the African-American civil rights movement was understood through television and popular media. The US civil rights movement made active and comprehensive use of photography—for example in May 1963 when images from Birmingham, Alabama, showed black children and protestors felled by water cannons and attacked by police dogs. In 1964 Martin Luther King praised the crucial role of photographic evidence in 'imprisoning' police brutality at Birmingham 'within a luminous glare revealing the naked truth to the whole world'.<sup>41</sup> Shocking, violent photos became the embodiment of truth, and in Australia became central to Australian campaigns such as the Australian Freedom Ride.<sup>42</sup>

In line with these international developments, during the 1960s an Australian civil rights movement emerged that made innovative use of visual imagery to show Aboriginal people as active agents demanding rights, rather than as passive victims.<sup>43</sup> Leading up to the 1967 referendum, a new language of self-determination emerged, documenting campaigners' activism, and showing Aboriginal leaders.<sup>44</sup> Other milestones over these years included the 1966 Gurindji Walkoff from Daguragu (Wave Hill) in the Northern Territory, a strike that lasted for eight years. Activist and historian Gary Foley has also argued for the significant but often overlooked place of a black intelligentsia, the 'urban, militant activists of Redfern, Fitzroy and South Brisbane' and the role of the Black Power movement in nurturing the higher-profile Tent Embassy protest of 1972.<sup>45</sup> By 1975 the media and particularly photo-journalism had become a significant force for influencing public opinion and reforming Aboriginal policy. In the context of these dramatic developments that radically re-shaped a global visual culture, I want to focus on two moments in *Poor Fellow My Country* that show how Herbert was drawing on new activist visual strategies to re-imagine the 1930s Darwin he had once known. It is important to note that although Herbert was a participant in this mediasphere, his specific ideas for the future of Aboriginal people did not map closely on to the concerns of the late twentieth-century Indigenous movement; for example, his disagreement with the land rights movement propelled by an urban intelligentsia that emerged during the 1960s emerges at the very end of *Poor Fellow My Country*, as Rifkah and Pat's plea for reserves is literally drowned out by 'cross-breeds' chanting '*Land Rights!*'

## I. Chained by the neck

The first moment concerns the treatment of Prindy, the beautiful 'quarter-caste' child. As Jeanine Leane has argued: 'The plot of *Poor Fellow My Country* is a custody battle for Prindy.'<sup>46</sup> The perfect, 'golden-skinned' child, Hugh Devlin-Glass suggests, is 'made to bear the hope of the entire nation', none more memorable perhaps than the moment he is lured into Ali Baba's golden-finch-net by the power of music, and thought to be an Indian god, 'all shiny gold of skin and towelled [sic] hair, so luminous of eye, so calm'.<sup>47</sup>

In a powerful episode, Prindy and his child-bride Savitra are arrested, chained by the neck and taken by train to 'Port Palmeston' (Darwin). However, his shrewd grandfather Jeremy Delacy—Herbert's alter ego—arranges for a reception by the press: as Dinny, the policeman, steps on to the platform 'with the two chained children shackled to his wrist ... *Pop! Pop!*—like little gunshots, but with the blaze of lightning—and again—*Pop! Pop! Flash! Flash!*—Everybody for the moment blinded and too astounded to speak.'<sup>48</sup> Dinny's superior officer hisses at him:

'For chrissake, Dinny, what'd you have to do that for?' ... Dinny said in a strangled voice, 'It was only for their protection, Sir ... I didn't want 'em jumpin' out of the train.' 'And now you've got 'em jumpin' right into the front page of bloody Truth ... "Police Brutality to Innocent Aboriginal Children" ... you goddamn, bloody, stupid, bastard!'<sup>49</sup>

And sure enough, as Herbert/ Delacy had foreseen, 'there it all was in *Truth* that came off Sunday's mail plane, under headlines almost word for word as Superintendent Bullco had predicted: 'Police Brutality to Aboriginal Children—Still This Evil Thing Goes On—Are We a Nation Without Shame?' and refers to the 'huge picture on the front page, of the black kids with neck-chains'. Later, when Prindy is being rushed by motor car to Alice Springs to be locked up in a boys' home, this newspaper story is the means of his rescue. His captor, Eddy,

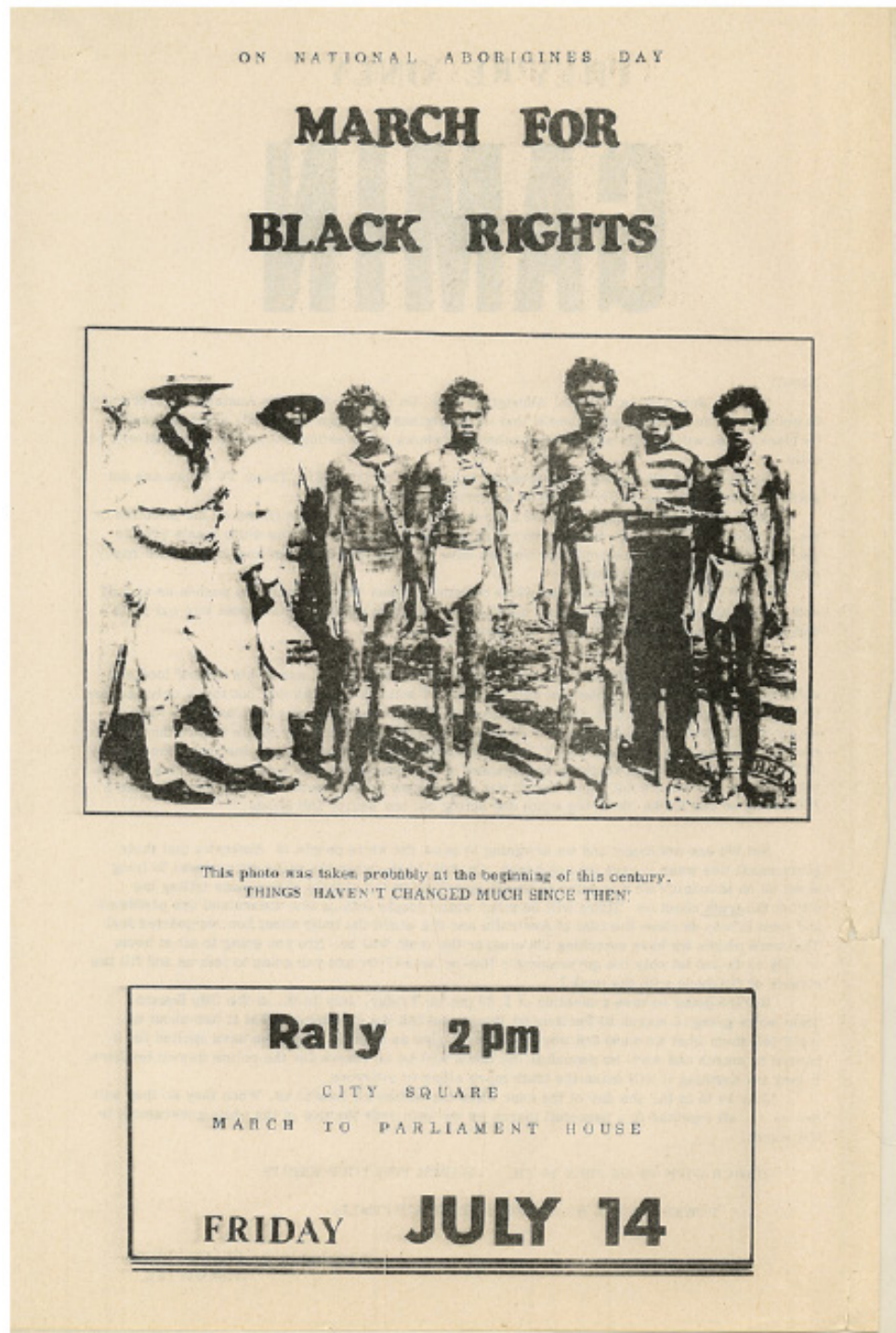


Figure 1 'March for Black Rights' rally poster with Birtles' photograph. Source: Gordon Bryant Papers MS 8256, Series 11 ATSI Matters, Box 174: Folder 'Abschol. Pamphlets', National Library of Australia



stops at Boulder Creek pub, filled with European immigrants and refugees who had paid attention to the article:

and those who could not read English, particularly to the pictures in it; and not being Australians and bred to regard Aboriginal persons as not quite human, they might have had very different feelings from what generally would be felt about children chained by the neck and shackled to a lanky bearded laughing policeman.<sup>50</sup>

These sympathetic outsiders intervene and Prindy escapes again. Here, Herbert drew effectively on the power to shock of this iconography, reminiscent of slavery. Seemingly distant from the Atlantic slave trade and its canonical forms of subjection and exploitation, recent research has shown how the tremendous cultural, moral and affective power of antislavery discourse popularised by the British abolitionist campaign culminating in 1833 remained powerful across the empire, and was consistently applied to Australian debates and processes.<sup>51</sup> In particular, antislavery symbolism, tactics and arguments were important to the evangelical lobby in Australia in protesting the status and conditions of the Indigenous population—and neck-chains remained a particularly potent symbol of oppression.<sup>52</sup>

Neck-chains were used on Aboriginal prisoners across northern Australia from the nineteenth century until 1959, becoming a focus for reformers from the interwar period. During the 1930s campaigners such as medical doctor Charles Duguid had already drawn attention to ill-treatment by using shocking photographic testimony: Duguid's biographer Rani Kerin notes how his encounter with filthy conditions in Alice Springs in 1934 had galvanised him, and that Duguid often sought to recreate and convey this structure of revelation in retelling this experience of shock followed by healing and reform: for example, a double-page photo-essay in the popular English magazine the *Weekly Illustrated* contrasted a full-length photograph of an Aboriginal man in chains with a neat photographic portrait of the 'same man, after 3 months' humane treatment'.<sup>53</sup>

By the early 1970s, photographs of the ill treatment of Aboriginal prisoners wearing heavy iron neck-chains had become effective symbols of protest, as posters from the Tent Embassy years reveal (see Figure 1). By 1975, the year that *Poor Fellow My Country* was published, photographs of neck-chained prisoners had become well established as a symbol of colonial oppression, and were reused in 1970s land rights posters. These reproduce earlier photographs taken by policemen of chained Aboriginal people, subverting their original meaning to suggest injustice. Typical of Herbert's hyperbolic aesthetic, often verging on the grotesque, the extension of the inhumane and racialised practice of neck-chaining Aboriginal prisoners to children—and the exquisite Prindy in particular—made his point with brutal force.

## II. Exposé of the Kahlin Compound

In a second key episode, the revelatory power of photo-journalism is deployed to expose poor conditions in the Kahlin Compound, where Herbert himself had worked as superintendent between October 1935 and 1936. In *Poor Fellow My Country* the obnoxious Dr Cuthbert Cobbitty represents real life Cecil Cook, who had been chief medical officer and chief protector of Aborigines since 1927.<sup>54</sup> Cook was a worthy successor to Spencer and his ilk, an ardent proponent of 'breeding out the colour' by 'uplifting' 'half-caste' Aboriginal women to the status of whites, and an enthusiastic supporter of removing children to institutions, proudly reporting in 1934 that '[p]ractically all half-caste children of both sexes, formerly left to live with aboriginals in compounds and bush camps ... have been removed to half-caste institutions under Government control'.<sup>55</sup> Cook, however, ignored the terrible

conditions prevailing within these places. It was not until complaints were presented to the Commonwealth–State Conference on Indigenous Affairs in 1937, and the institutions were visited by new Minister for the Interior, Jack McEwan, that reform began.

In *Poor Fellow My Country*, conditions at Kahlin and the Half-caste Home for Children are a major thread of critique, and the power of photography as witness draws upon new visual strategies of abjection that evoke concentration camp and slum squalor. Upon her arrival, young schoolteacher and Protector Alfie Candlemass immediately begins to institute reform—taking over cooking food for the children, for example.<sup>56</sup> Herbert himself, in his role of acting superintendent, had observed the substandard conditions prevailing within the compound, and in May 1936, had reported on the conditions and food rations issued to the 210 ‘inmates’, describing how:

The porridge, cooked the day before, already was sour and roped from the mould in it, and when doused with the thin milk, gave up the corpses of weevils by the score. The bread was even worse, stringy grey wrapped about congealed glue, the whole cased in charcoal. The tea had most of the leaves floating on top.<sup>57</sup>

Alfie agrees to reveal her experience of the compound to the pushy *Progressive* journalist Fay McFee, and a trap is set for Captain Shane entailing sabotage of the telephone exchange, a Dictaphone and a hidden microphone.<sup>58</sup> Trumping this slapstick scenario and its obsolete mimetic technologies is the photographic evidence obtained by McFee, who organises an aeroplane flight over the compound to take photographs that will serve as evidence for its poor conditions.<sup>59</sup> McFee’s story appears under ‘great banner headlines: TERRIFIC INDICTMENT OF OFFICIAL CALLOUSNESS’, causing a ‘national stir’ as well as a massive local scandal.

This episode evokes the use of techniques of aerial reconnaissance, used extensively during World Wars I and II and continuing during the Cold War. From the early twentieth century aviation increasingly entailed a new way of seeing, as military and cinematic techniques and technologies were co-produced to establish a ‘deadly harmony’ between the functions of eye and weapon.<sup>60</sup> Aerial photography in particular probed from afar, in 1962 for example providing crucial evidence of the construction of Soviet nuclear warheads, bunkers and other military infrastructure at San Cristobal in Cuba leading up to the 1962 Cuban missile crisis.<sup>61</sup> As Patricia Hayes has argued of the Namibia–Angola warzone, aerial photography in war initiates a stage where the gun and camera are no longer simply metaphorically ‘fused in the field’ as argued by theorists such as Susan Sontag, but are *literally* ‘fused together as one tool on the same machine: the aeroplane’.<sup>62</sup> Alongside photojournalism’s ‘struggle’ photography, aerial reconnaissance entailed a synergy between camera and gun. In Herbert’s world the two genres are merged, as the flight actually lands within the compound and gathers detailed evidence from both Aboriginal informants and eyewitness observation. The military staging of surveillance from afar probes as close as possible to confer power upon the aggressor; Herbert reverses this murderous gaze, redeploing its scopic regime on behalf of the victims of violence and oppression in an activist reimagining of visual technology. The grandiosity and violence of the aerial view is ruptured by proximity, as activists and oppressed meet in person.

Alfie subsequently threatens the corrupt Protector, telling him, ‘What you say you’ve done pretty well all these years is now on photographic record for publishing to the *Nation*. They did an aerial and ground survey yesterday. They landed at the Compound.’<sup>63</sup> He is silenced, acknowledging the power of such evidence. When Alfie complains about the lack of effect of this exposé to McFee, she responds: ‘it’s working slowly. Every time you hit the bastards you put a crack in ‘em and their rotten system ... and eventually they and it are going to fall to

pieces.<sup>64</sup> Herbert's persistent and touching optimism regarding his imagined hybrid future, his almost wistful expectation that surely justice will prevail, takes the form of activist photo-journalism and its apparent power to effect change.

## Conclusion

Herbert's oeuvre belongs to the genre of romance fiction that Robert Dixon argues must be recognised as an important site of contestation about ideas concerning race, gender, nation and empire, and that is uniquely revealing of the anxieties surrounding the transition from empire and into modernity. As Dixon notes, imperial knowledge is not simply imposed upon colonial discourse, but is displaced and disarticulated by processes of hybridisation.<sup>65</sup> Challenging colonial temporalities of linearity, progress and evolution, Herbert's hatred of the Commonwealth's system of tropical apartheid and his longing for a kindlier North drove his reorganisation of the relationships and places he had known, multiply reconnecting people, places and events through the folding and unfolding of the past in the novel's present. Published in 1975, *Poor Fellow My Country's* was a textual re-enactment, set in Herbert's and the nation's past. Written across the tumultuous decades of postwar change and dissent, in *Poor Fellow My Country* Herbert reimagined his time in Darwin, and how things *might have been* different, bringing together the early years of scientific modernist aspiration, interwar apartheid and a postwar radicalism to reconfigure his own experiences.

I have undertaken historical recontextualisation of the events and places Herbert writes of to argue that he harnessed the power of the radical social change he lived through, and its emerging postwar technologies of activism, in a distinctive temporal narrative strategy. Herbert used re-enactment, with all its possibilities for disruption, to challenge the terrible conditions he witnessed, and ultimately colonial authority, by reimagining Darwin and its rigid social and racial taxonomy as it might have been. He drew from new politicised media techniques of eyewitness and revelation to picture the violation of human rights in Australia's north—but also their possible restitution. The ill-treated stolen child makes front-page news, discrediting the authorities and their harsh racist policies. Using the same strategy of public exposure, Protector Alfie Candlemass quickly institutes reform by improving the compound children's food and banishing the mouldy, ropy porridge that Herbert had witnessed and described in such nauseating terms. Although ultimately bleak in the novel's concluding vision of disaster, these moments point to Herbert's disruptive, 'what-if' or past conditional mode of seeing the north. For the older Herbert, postwar social change and especially civil rights campaigns that deployed the media to challenge injustice and oppression allowed him to reimagine the scenes of his youth as *what might have been*. Through this past conditional lens, he re-enacts his youth and the Darwin he had experienced during the 1930s *as if*: as if his own views had been shared more widely; as if figures such as Alfie Candlemass, Fay McFee, Rifkah and, of course, Jeremy Delacy had peopled Darwin and campaigned for Aboriginal people; if hybridity and interracial tenderness had been recognised as the nation's great future.

## About the author

Jane Lydon is the Wesfarmers Chair of Australian History at the University of Western Australia. Her publications include *Photography, Humanitarianism, Empire* (2016) and *The Flash of Recognition: Photography and the Emergence of Indigenous Rights* (2012), which won the 2013 Queensland Literary Awards' USQ History Book Award.

## Notes

1. Russell McDougall, 'Herbert, Albert Francis Xavier (1901–1984)', Australian Dictionary of Biography, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/herbert-albert-francis-xavier-12623/text22741>.
2. His interest had been prompted by reading the West African-set play by Leon Gordon, *White Cargo* (1925), in 1926, which with the 1942 film starring Hedy Lamar was hugely successful in Britain and America during the 1930s and 1940s. Featuring a seductive but sinister 'half-breed' who seduces a white Englishman, the work capitalised on long-standing fears regarding the moral temptations of life for white men in the colonies. Stephanie Newell, *Literary Culture in Colonial Ghana: How to Play the Game of Life*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 2002.
3. Herbert spent several periods in the North between 1927 and 1930, and again between 1935 and 1938. Before writing *Capricornia*, which he did in London between 1930 and 1932, Herbert had visited Darwin and the Northern Territory between 1927 and early 1928 and then spent another year from mid 1929 working as dispenser-dresser at the Darwin hospital. Frances De Groen, *Xavier Herbert: A Biography*, University of Queensland Press, Brisbane, 1998, p. 71.
4. Tony Austin, 'McGinness, Valentine Bynoe (1910–1988)', Australian Dictionary of Biography, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University. <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/mcginness-valentine-bynoe-14671/text25807>.
5. McDougall.
6. A key sub-plot concerns the young Constance Differ, who like Norman is raised above her 'half-caste' station, but falls prey to a white man and gives birth to a daughter named Tocky. Norman's and Tocky's fates become intertwined.
7. Key references in this substantial literature include John Mulvaney, Howard Morphy and Alison Petch (eds), 'My Dear Spencer': The Letters of F. J. Gillen to Baldwin Spencer, Hyland House, Melbourne, 1997; Henrika Kuklick, "'Humanity in the Chrysalis Stage": Indigenous Australians in the Anthropological Imagination', *British Journal for the History of Science*, vol. 39, no. 4, 2006, pp. 535–68; George Stocking, *After Tylor: British Social Anthropology 1888–1951*, University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, 1995; Patrick Wolfe, *Settler Colonialism and the Transformation of Anthropology: The Politics and Poetics of an Ethnographic Event*, Cassell, London, 1999; Russell McGregor, *Imagined Destinies: Aboriginal Australians and the Doomed Race Theory, 1880–1939*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1997. Tony Bennett, 'Making and Mobilising Worlds', in *Material Powers: Cultural Studies, History and the Material Turn*, ed. Tony Bennett and Patrick Joyce, Routledge, London and New York, 2010, pp. 190–208.
8. McGregor, pp.62–86; Tony Austin, *Never Trust a Government Man: Northern Territory Aboriginal Policy 1911–1939*, Northern Territory University, Darwin, 1997. Powers to remove children had already been established by the 1897 Aboriginal Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act (Qld), which made the Chief Protector the legal guardian of every Aboriginal and 'half-caste' child under eighteen years old, allowing any Aboriginal person to be forced onto a mission or settlement, and the removal of children by force, and which was the model for both the South Australian Aborigines Act (1911) and the federal Northern Territory Aborigines Ordinance (1911).
9. W. Baldwin Spencer, *Preliminary Report on the Aborigines of the Northern Territory*, Government Printer, Melbourne, July 1913, p. 9.
10. Frances Devlin-Glass, 'The Eco-Centric Self and the Sacred in Xavier Herbert's *Poor Fellow My Country*', *JASAL: Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature*, vol. 8, 2008, pp. 45–63.
11. See also Liz Conor's contribution to this volume of *Cultural Studies Review*, 'Blood Call and 'Natural Flutters': Xavier Herbert's Racialised Quartet of Heteronormativity'.
12. Rebecca Schneider, *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Re-enactment*, Routledge, London, 2011.
13. Tani E. Barlow (ed.), *Formations of Colonial Modernity in East Asia*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2007; Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 2007.
14. Robert Dixon, *Photography, Early Cinema and Colonial Modernity: Frank Hurley's Synchronized Lecture Entertainments*, Anthem Press, Sydney, 2012, pp. 212–13. Lynda Nead, *Victorian Babylon: People, Streets and Images in Nineteenth-Century London*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 2000, p. 8.
15. For key studies focused on British experience see Catherine Hall, *Civilising Subjects: Metropole and Colony in the English Imagination 1830–1867*, Chicago University Press, Chicago, 2002; Mrinalini Sinha, 'Britain and the Empire: Toward a New Agenda for Imperial History', *Radical History Review*, no. 72, 1998, p. 163–75; Kathleen Wilson (ed.), *A New Imperial History: Culture, Identity and Modernity in Britain and the Empire, 1660–1840*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2004.

16. Anja Schwarz, "'... Just as it would have been in 1861": Stuttering Colonial Beginnings in ABC's *Outback House*', in *Historical Reenactment: From Realism to the Affective Turn*, ed. Iain McCalman and Paul Pickering, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2010, pp. 18–38.
17. Vanessa Agnew, 'History's Affective Turn: Historical Reenactment and its Work in the Present', *Rethinking History*, vol. 11, no. 3, 2007, pp. 299–312. Using the example of German historical reality TV series, Agnew argues that they use history as a conceit for performing 'a particular form of cultural and political work—the attempt to reconcile current economic and social conditions in postunification Germany'.
18. Catriona Elder, 'Colonialism and Reenactment Television: Imagining Belonging in *Outback House*', in *Settler and Creole Reenactment*, ed. Vanessa Agnew and Jonathan Lamb, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2009, pp. 193–207; Catriona Elder, 'Re-enacting National Histories: *Outback House* and Narratives of Australia's Colonial Past', in *The Nation on Screen: Discourses of the National on Global Television*, ed. Alexander Dhoest, Hugh O'Donnell and Enric Castello, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle, 2009, pp. 217–32. For other studies that explore re-enactment and Australian history see Maria Nugent, "'An Echo of That Other Cry": Re-Enacting Captain Cook's First Landing as Conciliation Event', in *Conciliation on Colonial Frontiers: Conflict, Performance and Commemoration in Australia and the Pacific Rim*, ed. Kate Darian-Smith and Penelope Edmonds, Routledge, New York, 2015, pp. 193–210; Penelope Edmonds, *Settler Colonialism and (Re)conciliation*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2016.
19. Anja Schwarz "'Not This Year!": Reenacting Contested Pasts Aboard The Ship', *Rethinking History*, vol 11, no. 3, 2007, pp. 427–46.
20. Jane Lydon, 'Living Pictures: Photography, Re-enactment and Colonialism', in *Conciliation on Colonial Frontiers: Conflict, Performance, and Commemoration in Australia and the Pacific Rim*, ed. Kate Darian-Smith and Penelope Edmonds, Routledge, New York, 2015, pp. 95–112.
21. Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, Routledge, New York, 1994, pp. 236–56.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 252.
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31. Sharon Sliwinski, 'The Childhood of Human Rights: The Kodak on the Congo', *Journal of Visual Culture*, vol. 5, no. 3, 2006, pp. 333–63.
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33. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Righting Wrongs', *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, vol 103, no. 2/3, 2004, p. 523.
34. Lynn Hunt, 'Foreword', in Sharon Sliwinski, *Human Rights in Camera*, Chicago University Press, Chicago, 2011, p. ix; and see Susie Linfield, *The Cruel Radiance: Photography and Political Violence*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2010, p. 37. However, many have also insisted that such images may diminish and humiliate the suffering person, rendering them passive victims: see Abigail Solomon-Godeau, *Photography at the Dock: Essays on Photographic History, Institutions, and Practices*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1991, p. 176; Martha Rosler, 'In, Around, and Afterthoughts (on documentary photography)', in *Three Works*, Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, Halifax, 1981, p. 72.
35. Tim Rowse (ed.), *Contesting Assimilation*, API Network, Perth, 2005; Anna Haebich, *Spinning the Dream: Assimilation in Australia 1950–1970*, Fremantle Press, Fremantle, 2008.
36. Michael Courtney, 'Give Them a Chance', *Australian Monthly*, 1 March 1955, p. 37.
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41. Leigh Raiford, *Imprisoned in a Luminous Glare: Photography and the African American Freedom Struggle*, University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 2011.
42. Ann Curthoys, *Freedom Ride: A Freedom Rider Remembers*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 2002, p. 29.
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47. Devlin-Glass.
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49. Herbert, *Poor Fellow My Country*, pp. 565–7. Later Alfie joins an organisation whose magazine called *Australia Free* announces the first Day of Mourning in 1938, just as Herbert's publisher P. R. Stephenson had published an account of the original event.
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52. Jane Lydon, 'The Bloody Skirt of Settlement', *Australian Historical Studies*, vol. 45, no. 1, 2014, pp. 46–70; Penelope Edmonds, 'Collecting Looerryminer's "Testimony"', *Australian Historical Studies*, vol. 45, no. 1, 2014, pp. 13–33; Fiona Paisley, 'An Echo of Black Slavery: Emancipation, Forced Labour and Australia in 1933', *Australian Historical Studies*, vol. 45, no. 1, 2014, pp. 103–25.
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55. Tony Austin, 'Cecil Cook, Scientific Thought and "Half-Castes" in the Northern Territory 1927–1939', *Aboriginal History*, vol. 14, 1990, pp. 104–22.
56. Her husband, the health inspector, becomes a potent threat and eventually she installs Prindy's mother, Nelly, as baker.
57. Xavier Herbert, quoted in Tony Austin, *I Can Picture the Old Home So Clearly: The Commonwealth and 'Half-caste' Youth in the Northern Territory 1911–1939*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, 1993, p. 178.
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59. Herbert, *Poor Fellow My Country*, p. 354.

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