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A Personal Journey with Anangu History and Politics

Bill Edwards

Introduction

Fifty years ago, in September 1961, I sat in the shade of a mulga tree near the Officer Creek, a usually dry watercourse which rises in the Musgrave Ranges in the far north-west of South Australia and peters out in the sandhill country to the south. I was observing work being done to supply infrastructure for a new settlement for Pitjantjatjara/Yankunytjatjara Aboriginal people. That settlement, which opened in the following month of October, is Fregon, an Aboriginal community which together with other Pitjantjatjara/Yankunytjatjara communities featured in newspaper and radio news reports in September 2011. These reports referred to overcrowding in houses, the lack of adequate furnishings, poverty and, in the case of Fregon, children starving. Later comments by people on the ground suggested that the reports of starvation were exaggerated.¹

When I returned to my home at Ernabella Mission, 60 kilometres north-east of Fregon, in 1961, I recorded my observations and forwarded them to *The Advertiser* in Adelaide. They were published as a feature article on Saturday 23 September, 1961 under the heading ‘Cattle Station for “Old Australians”’.² As I read and listened to the recent reports I was concerned at the limited understanding of the history and the effects of policy changes in the region. As a letter I wrote to *The Advertiser*, referring back to my earlier article, was not published, I expanded it into an article and sent it to Nicolas Rothwell, the Northern Territory correspondent for *The Australian*, seeking his advice as to where I might submit it. He sent it on to Sydney and it appeared as a feature article in *The Weekend Australian*, 24-25 September, 2011.³ Among the positive responses to this article was a request to adapt the contents for a current issues forum paper for this journal. Before embarking on this adaptation, let me explain how I came to be at this remote place in 1961.

The beginning of my journey

On completion of my studies at the University of Melbourne for ordination to the ministry of the Presbyterian Church, I was appointed in 1958 as assistant to the

Superintendent of Ernabella Mission in the Far North-West of South Australia. My studies in history, English literature, philosophy and theology included nothing directly to prepare me for work with Aboriginal people. Stanner's 'great Australian silence' in relation to the place of Aboriginal people in Australian society prevailed. However, I had met members of the Ernabella Choir when they visited Adelaide in 1954 on the occasion of the Royal Visit, had visited Alice Springs as a member of a work party in 1955 and heard Doug Nicholls (later Sir Douglas) speak at the university in 1957, following his visit to the Western Desert region of Western Australia to investigate effects of the Woomera rocket range tests on Aboriginal people.

Most of the people who lived at Ernabella belonged to two of the Western Desert dialect groups, Pitjantjatjara and Yankunytjatjara. They refer to themselves as Anangu, a word in these dialects meaning person or body. Their traditional country lay in the north-west corner of South Australia and adjacent areas of Western Australia and the Northern Territory. For untold millennia, the various local totemic kin groups utilised the resources of the region by using their hunter-gatherer techniques and sought to maintain the continued supply of these resources by passing on the oral stories which recorded the creative activities of the *Tjukurpa* (Dreaming) ancestors and singing and performing the associated songs and rituals.⁴

While the security of distance largely protected the Anangu from the negative effects of the initial British invasion and colonisation of Australia, exploration and pastoral industry expansion began to impinge on their society in the late nineteenth century. Exploratory expeditions led by William Gosse and Ernest Giles entered their lands in 1873. Giles camped at a waterhole which later became the site of Ernabella Mission and soon afterwards met some resistance from Anangu near a creek which he named The Officer. During the following half-century there were occasional incursions by prospectors, explorers and sundry adventurers. Remoteness limited surveillance of contact between these early intruders and the Anangu but following reports of abuses against Aborigines, agitation on their behalf led to the proclamation of an area of 56,721 square kilometers as the North-West Aboriginal Reserve in 1921. The introduction of a bounty on dingo scalps by the South Australian government in 1913 motivated people known as 'doggers' to enter the reserve to offer the Anangu commodities such as flour, tea and sugar, for which they were acquiring a taste, in

return for scalps. In 1933, a lease was granted to a pastoralist for an area of 500 square miles surrounding the Ernabella Creek. Three other blocks of the same area bordering the reserve, were granted as water leases in 1934.

Ernabella Mission

In 1935, Charles Duguid, an Adelaide surgeon who had emigrated from Scotland, having been alerted by a missionary patient to abuses suffered by Aborigines in northern Australia, undertook the long motor journey to Ernabella, driven by a young man Reg (RM) Williams. Concerned at what he heard and observed of the abuse of Aboriginal labour and women and the effects of introduced diseases such as yaws and syphilis, and as a Presbyterian layman, he advocated the establishment of a mission to serve as a buffer between Anangu society and white settlers. The Presbyterian Church purchased the Ernabella pastoral lease and founded Ernabella Mission in 1937. Duguid laid down principles which included minimal interference with traditional Anangu society and the use of Pitjantjatjara language. The sheep industry was maintained to provide employment as shepherds, shearers and well sinkers. A school based on a policy of vernacular education was opened in 1940. Staff provided medical aid with assistance by pedal radio from the Flying Doctor base in Alice Springs. From 1945 nursing sisters provided medical care at a clinic. A handcraft centre which provided employment opportunities for women commenced in 1948. It continues now as the longest surviving Aboriginal art centre in Australia. In the early years, Church services were held in the open-air and brush shelters. In 1952, a large cement block church building was opened and the first baptismal service conducted. Anangu men made the cement blocks and worked on construction of the building.

This was Ernabella as it was when I commenced service there in May 1958. Due to family illnesses, the Superintendent resigned in September and I was appointed to that role. The population of Ernabella averaged approximately 400, increasing to 500 at Christmas and at shearing time in July, when Anangu who normally lived at cattle stations to the east of Ernabella joined their relatives. Following shearing and Christmas most of the people went out west on camels, horses and donkeys to visit their traditional homelands. Seven staff were employed at Ernabella: three men who supervised the sheep work, fencing, vehicle and general maintenance, water supply and driving the mission truck on fortnightly round trips of 630 kilometres to the

railway station at Finke for supplies, a schoolteacher, nursing sister, craft supervisor and superintendent. In the latter role, I conducted church services, managed the office, store, kitchen/dining room, garden and coordinated all aspects of the mission activities.

There are major contrasts between the demographic, social, political, financial and other situations as they were in the Anangu region in 1961 and as they are in 2011.⁵ Then Ernabella was the only settlement. Now there are six major communities and several smaller homeland communities. The population of 4-500 in the earlier period has increased to approximately 2,700. Whereas in 1961, the non-Anangu population at Ernabella, including children, was sixteen, in recent years this population in the region has hovered around 200. In earlier years there was limited movement of Anangu beyond their own country. Now there is significant mobility to other regions including Alice Springs, Port Augusta and Adelaide. This is motivated partly by social and health issues. In 2009-10, I undertook research into Anangu living in Adelaide, identifying 26 households and approximately 150 individuals residing there. In the 1960s, the health of the people at Ernabella was generally good, the main problems relating to infant health and the incidence of gastro-enteritis which occasioned a relatively high infant mortality rate until the mid-sixties, when new methods of treatment led to a decline in that rate. In recent decades the adult health situation has deteriorated dramatically, mainly due to lifestyle changes. The rising incidence of diabetes has been the main indicator of this change. Other deaths have resulted from cancers, heart ailments and motor accidents.

The increasing death rate among younger and middle aged adults has also been associated with rising levels of alcohol consumption, drug abuse, petrol sniffing and associated violence and suicides. These activities were unknown in the 1960s. Petrol sniffing was first introduced to the area at the end of that decade and became a serious problem later in the 1970s. Alcohol use by Aborigines on the reserve was banned under government legislation but there was increasing use in the 1970s by some Anangu as they visited roadhouses on the Stuart Highway and brought it back to communities. Cannabis was first introduced in the mid-1970s. The use and abuse of these commodities escalated through the following decades.

The official policy relating to Aborigines in 1961 was assimilation as formulated by the Australian Council for Native Welfare in 1951. Although the expressed thrust of this policy to enable Aborigines to attain the same manner of living as other Australians was followed at Ernabella, the mission policies of minimal interference with traditional practices and of respecting and using the vernacular language modified the approach to assimilation and at times brought the mission into conflict with government department officers who favoured a more rigorous program of suppressing traditional practices and imposing the use of English. While Anangu exercised powerful control in the sphere of traditional ceremony and social organisation there was no avenue for them to exercise political authority in relation to the wider Australian political, legal and economic structures of that time. Ernabella was administered by the Presbyterian Board of Missions through a local staff council. While missions have been severely criticized for their autocratic control of Aboriginal lives under such structures, these criticisms ignored the daily interaction that took place between mission staff and the men and women they were working with in homes, gardens, shearing sheds, craftrooms, kitchens, clinics and schools. Staff members took account of what they heard from Anangu as they discussed and decided matters in staff council meetings. During the 1960s, Anangu individuals were invited to participate in these meetings. This prepared them for the political changes when, in line with the Board of Missions' policy, administration of Ernabella and Fregon was handed over by the church to local incorporated community councils from 1 January 1974.⁶

Another marked contrast between the situations in 1961 and 2011 relates to the availability of financial support for Aboriginal settlements. Prior to the 1967 referendum the Commonwealth government was not empowered to fund Aboriginal programs in the states. The South Australian government provided limited financial support for the work at Ernabella, this mainly in the form of rations for the elderly, medical supplies and a grant for the school. Child endowment was paid to the mission to provide meals for schoolchildren and infants. The church provided salaries for staff. In contrast to the current provision of substantial remote area allowances for non-Anangu people working in the region, mission staffed received less than those employed in similar occupations elsewhere, but accepted these conditions as they worked willingly with a sense of dedication and commitment to the cause of

Aboriginal training and advancement. In my first two years as superintendent the annual budget for running the daily operations at Ernabella was \$9600.

Workers received two meals a day in the dining hall, clothing and a small cash wage. This food was supplemented by hunting and gathering traditional foods. When I read references in recent press reports to lettuces costing \$7.00 in the store, I recalled the people once despising them as *rapitaku mai*, rabbit food. Most of the women at Ernabella received food, clothing and small cash returns through the handcraft industry as the older ones spun wool by a traditional method and the younger women used this fibre to make hooked and woven rugs and painted designs on cards and fabrics. Women also worked in the school, clinic and as bakers and cooks in the kitchen. Men slaughtered and butchered sheep and tended the garden to provide meat and vegetables for the kitchen. An underlying principle in that era was expressed in the often used phrase ‘No work, no food.’ While writing this paper, I read an article in *The Weekend Australian* by the former chairman of the Northern Land Council, Galarrwuy Yunupingu who reflected nostalgically on similar experiences in that region: ‘Under the early mission system we worked or there were no rations, or no pay. We contributed or we were left aside. This is something my father understood, as it was an exchange.’⁷

Current annual expenditure on programs in the Anangu communities now totals many millions of dollars. Having observed the effects of increased government spending on Aboriginal programs in the 1970s, I formulated a revision of the then popular Parkinson’s Law in the following terms: ‘The effectiveness of programs for Aboriginal advancement is in inverse proportion to the amount of government finance expended on them.’ A large percentage of the Aboriginal Affairs budget was spent on salaries, motor vehicles and housing for non-Aboriginal staff. This is not to let governments off the financial hook but to urge that past wastefulness be curtailed and steps taken to ensure that a high percentage of funding goes towards Aboriginal employment. The construction of a now unused solar powered power plant and the building of substance abuse treatment centres which have had little use are examples of financial wastage in the area.

Fregon

After 34 years of mission settlement at Ernabella, firewood and water supplies were being depleted by an increasing population. Fregon, was designed as a step in decentralisation to relieve these pressures and to provide employment in cattle work. It had been customary for young men to work as stockmen on nearby cattle stations. At Ernabella the sheep industry was the major source of employment, as families worked as shepherds at the various wells and bores and men were employed as shearers. Younger men found cattle work more exciting and fulfilling than the occupations associated with sheep. The Anangu identified people who came from the mountain range country which extended to the west along the South Australian/Northern Territory border as *pulitja*, related to the hills, and those who belonged traditionally to the sandhill country to the south of the ranges as *pilatja*, related to the plains. Fregon provided a base for the sandhill people.

Four staff members were initially stationed at Fregon: an overseer, cattleman, teacher and nursing sister. Three photographs which illustrated my 1961 article are revealing in retrospect as they show local Anangu men operating the water-drilling plant, erecting a water tank on a high stand, and laying water pipes. The article referred to other men making cement blocks, carting sand, mixing cement, clearing dead timber and establishing a vegetable garden. The article concluded with the following aim: “It is planned that later returns from the sale of cattle will provide capital for further development towards the ultimate aim of ensuring economic security for these Pitjantjatjara people, a security to be gained as a reward from their own labours.”

The work at Fregon showed promise in its early years with men working as stockmen, constructing fences and erecting windmills and squatters tanks at the bores. During the 1960s and 1970s, I visited Fregon frequently as Superintendent of Ernabella/Fregon and later as Minister of the Pitjantjatjara Parish of the Uniting Church, based at Amata. An abiding memory is of a sense that it was then very much a place that belonged to the Anangu people and of which they were proud.

The Anangu people who did much of the work at Ernabella and Fregon were able to do this not because they had attended courses but as a result of their close working relationship with the few staff members, observing and copying what they were doing. This reflected the principal method of traditional Aboriginal education. Later in

the 1960s, men and women from Ernabella and Fregon gained employment picking fruit in the Riverland region of South Australia. While this program proved very successful in its early years, it ended after government departments took over its administration and less care was taken in the selection of workers. Some success was also achieved at Ernabella in the late 1960s and early 1970s with families running the bakery and butcher shop as their own businesses. Recent reports refer to new houses having no furniture and of beds being made in Adelaide and transported to communities, only to be kept in storage. I recall occasions in the early 1960s, when the clinic required a bed or the school some cupboards. I measured timber and young Anangu men made the furniture.

A Changing World

In the 1970s, widespread changes throughout the world had their effects in Aboriginal communities. The world we thought we were preparing Anangu for was being transformed through increases in welfare provisions, sexual liberation and wider availability of alcohol, pornography and drugs. The increasing welfare economy undermined the motivation to be engaged in work projects. Changes in methods of handling cattle in the pastoral industry, with the use of trap yards and road transports, lessened opportunities for men to be employed as stockmen on nearby stations. As the amount of Commonwealth money for Aboriginal programs increased dramatically there were stricter controls on, for example, building standards, and an escalation in staff numbers as jobs once done by local people were performed by imported labour. Previously, Anangu men had made bricks, mixed cement, and under the supervision of one builder, had erected their houses and other buildings. After the 1967 referendum, the influx of Commonwealth money enabled the construction of a community centre and pre-school at Ernabella. The bricks were made and laid by Anangu men under the supervision of a builder. At the beginning of 1971 the school was handed over to the Education Department. I recall that when a superintendent from that department said that they would erect new buildings, I suggested that consideration be given to contracting that work to the mission so that these men could be further employed. I was informed that, as strict financial timelines and building specifications must be met, this would be impossible. To me it was the thin edge of the wedge that was to alienate Anangu men from much of the future developmental

work in the region. By the 1990s most building work was performed by outside contractors. When I visited one community in 2003 I observed seventeen new houses being constructed with no local Aboriginal labour employed.

Younger people no longer had the strong models their fathers and uncles had previously provided as stockmen, shearers, gardeners and brickmakers. Several became victims to the lures of petrol sniffing, cannabis, alcohol abuse and associated social, health and legal problems. Older people now had access to pensions but were often encouraged by younger relatives to gamble and lose their cash which was then used to purchase alcohol. It has saddened me to see many of my Anangu contemporaries lose their children and grandchildren to motor accidents, alcohol and drug fuelled violence, suicide and modern life style illnesses. Since moving to Adelaide, as an interpreter in Pitjantjatjara, I have dealt with the results of such incidents which have resulted in cases of long term hospitalisation and incarceration in the prison system. As I have been writing this paper, I have received news of the suicide deaths of two young women and of other tragic deaths in the Anangu lands.

Whereas under mission administration there was a degree of coordination across all aspects of community life including employment, education, health, stores and recreation, in remote communities now, there are several government departments and NGOs as well as the community council involved in planning and service delivery, this often leading to confusion and duplication. School principals, struggling with the problem of declining attendance rates have complained that the provision of vehicles by other government departments to enable community members to travel to other centres for sporting carnivals has encouraged children to absent themselves from school.

While the policy, as espoused by the Political Scientist Professor Charles Rowley in the late 1960s, of transferring authority to local community councils, appeared to be the appropriate one in that age of post-colonialism, it did not take sufficient account of Aboriginal authority structures. Under mission and early community control, the cattle industry at Fregon prospered. The spread of brucellosis and bovine TB throughout Central Australia in the late 1970s hindered this progress. As cattle were again introduced, families sought to establish their own small herds on limited areas, rather than support a community based industry. When I read the comment by an

American anthropologist that George Bush's problem in Iraq was that he sought to impose democracy on a clan based society, it struck a chord as I observed the difficulties arising when family loyalties and disputes undermined the effectiveness of community councils. The perseverance of traditional values and obligations has proved inimical to progress in the realms of political and financial independence. The influx of considerable sums of money through sales of art has done little or nothing towards building financial and social capital to ensure a more prosperous and independent future for residents of remote communities.

The transfer of administration of Anangu settlements from mission or government control to incorporated community councils was followed by negotiations which culminated in 1981 in the granting of inalienable freehold title to an area of 102,360 square kilometres to Anangu Pitjantjatjara Incorporated. This area included the North-West and Indulkana Aboriginal Reserves as well as the Ernabella, Kenmore Park and Mimili pastoral leases. The Granite Downs pastoral lease of 9,519 square kilometres was added later. These negotiations commenced with the formation of a Pitjantjatjara Council at a meeting of representatives from several communities at Amata in July 1976. As this council met bi-monthly over the next four years, I recorded the minutes in English and Pitjantjatjara and interpreted as Anangu interacted with lawyers, anthropologists and government ministers and bureaucrats. The land title deed was handed by the Premier, David Tonkin to Anangu representatives at Itjinpiri, eight kilometres north of Ernabella, on 4 November 1981.⁸

Thirty years later the following headline appeared in *The Australian*: 'Land rights hollow, say elders.'⁹ The two men quoted are Kawaki "Punch" Thompson and Robert Stevens who were schoolboys in my early years at Ernabella and who used the education gained at the mission school to support their elders in the lands rights negotiations. According to Thompson: 'Years ago, there were very strong and smart people, and they were travelling together and working together and fighting together ...But today, we're not strong. Something happened, and I don't know what. There was alcohol and worse in the communities, and nobody learned control.'¹⁰

The hopes of entering into a new era of social and economic independence through community control and land rights have not been fulfilled. Yunupingu expresses the same disillusionment: 'This changed in modern times when suddenly we needed no

exchange, we just had to turn up at a welfare office and pick up money.’¹¹ Perhaps we should not be too surprised at this lack of fulfillment when we examine the many post-colonial situations around the world where independence and self-government have not produced the promised freedom and prosperity. The following comment by the anthropologists John and Jean Comaroff related to their study of missions in southern Africa resonates with the experience of those who have advocated the changes towards self-management in Aboriginal communities and now observe the dysfunction in many communities. According to the Comaroffs: ‘the campaign of the Nonconformist mission to refashion modern African personhood and to insert itself into the struggle over individual and collective rights, is a study in ambiguity, contradiction, and the sheer perversity of the unintended in history.’¹²

In his comments quoted above, Galarrwuy Yunupingu referred to the basic Aboriginal value of exchange or reciprocity. Central to the social, economic and ritual life of the Anangu was the concept of *ngapartji ngapartji*, in turn, in turn. In their earlier contacts with pastoralists and missionaries they were able to establish some degree of reciprocity in their relationships by giving their labour or exchanging dingo scalps in return for the new foods and other commodities they wanted. The increasing extent and pace of change from the 1970s seems to have thrown this balance out of symmetry. Anangu, despite the rhetoric of self-management and self-determination, appear to be more dependent now than they were under mission administration.

One of the issues raised in debates about remote Aboriginal societies focuses on where their future lies. In the 1960s, while we had many of the men and women working in the sheep, cattle, building, fencing, gardening and craft industries, I battled the problem of providing more employment for the growing population, conscious that distance from markets was a constraint. Thus we looked for such opportunities as the fruit picking project. Some observers now advocate the closure of remote communities and movement of people to other areas where employment might be available. However, this does not take account of the people’s long attachment with and obligations to their lands, or of the social problems encountered by those who have already moved to centres such as Alice Springs and Port Augusta.

Even as I write this, the newly appointed Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, Paul Caica, is reported as conceding that ‘there is no economic base to support communities in the

Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Lands’ while conceding that ‘the only jobs there are currently, in the main, the jobs that are being done by white people’.¹³ Although in many respects the situation appears dire, I retain a spark of hope when I hear the renewed Ernabella school choir singing, see the developments in the Anangu arts industry and hear reports of the strong leadership being exercised by some of the women. Despite the problems, efforts should be made to develop strong educational and employment programs in these communities, as well as encouragement given for younger Anangu to work in other areas through mining, tourism and seasonal work while retaining links with their home communities.

The recent reports about Fregon and other Anangu communities refer to children being hungry, the high price of foodstuffs in local stores, emergency food being provided by Red Cross, newly constructed houses having no furniture, and the continuing problem of low school attendance rates. These reports highlight the need for strong coordinated action based on comprehensive and deep consultation with all concerned parties. This may involve some form of income management. As I look through my files of past decades, I come across similar headlines to those appearing today. Unless rewarding, fulfilling and demanding employment programs are planned and implemented in these communities our descendants will be reading similar headlines in another 50 years and remote Aboriginal people will remain in a state of dependency.

About the Author

W. H. (Bill) Edwards, ordained as a Minister of the Presbyterian Church in 1958, was Superintendent of Ernabella Mission (1958-72), Superintendent of Mowanjum Mission (1972-73), Minister of the Pitjantjatjara Parish based at Fregon (1973) and at Amata (1976-80). He interpreted during negotiations which led to the granting of Land Rights over the Pitjantjatjara/Yankunytjatjara lands and the Maralinga Tjarutja lands. He lectured in Aboriginal Studies at the Torrens College of Advanced Education (1975) and at the South Australian College of Advanced Education from 1991, the University of South Australia (1981-1996). In retirement he remains an Adjunct Senior Lecturer at the University. In 2008 he was awarded a PhD in history at Flinders University for a thesis, *Moravian Aboriginal Missions in Australia*. He is the author of *An Introduction to*

Aboriginal Societies, Tuggerah, NSW: Social Science Press, 2nd ed. 2004. He was awarded membership of the Order of Australia in 2009.

¹ 'APY food shortage? Not so, say leaders', *Aboriginal Way* (South Australian Native Title Services), Issue 46, October 2011, p.6.

² Bill Edwards, 'Cattle Station for Old Australians', *The Advertiser*, 23 September, 1961.

³ Bill Edwards, 'Pride of Place is Wiped Out by Welfare', *The Weekend Australian*, 24-25 September, 2011, Inquirer section, p.3.

⁴ WH Edwards, *An Introduction to Aboriginal Societies*, South Melbourne: Thompson Social Science Press, 2nd edition, 2004, pp.16-27, 37-51.

⁵ WH Edwards, Patterns of Aboriginal Residence in the North-west of South Australia, *Journal of the Anthropological Society of South Australia*, Volume 30, Numbers 1 & 2, December 1992, pp.2-32.

⁶ WH Edwards, The Changing Climate of Aboriginal Development, *Interchange*, No 14, 1973, pp.70-80.

⁷ Galarrwuy Yunupingu, 'Fair Exchange the Key to Indigenous Prosperity', *The Weekend Australian*, 5-6 November, 2001, p.18.

⁸ WH Edwards, 'Aboriginal Land Rights', in Christobet Mattingley and Ken Hampton (Eds), *Survival in Our Own Land*, Adelaide: Wakefield Press, 1988, pp.79-87.

⁹ Mark Schliebs, 'Land Rights Hollow, Say Elders', *The Australian*, 4 November, 2011, p.10.

¹⁰ Mark Schliebs, 'Land Rights Hollow, Say Elders', *The Australian*, 4 November, 2011, p.10.

¹¹ Galarrwuy Yunupingu, 'Fair Exchange the Key to Indigenous Prosperity', *The Weekend Australian*, 5-6 November, 2001, p.18.

¹² John and Jean Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution: The Dialectic of Modernity on a South African frontier*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997, Vol. 2, p.29.

¹³ Mark Schliebs, 'New Minister Admits Problems over APY', *The Australian*, 10 November, 2011, p.7.