
Following The Destruction of Aboriginal Society, Charles Rowley's Outcasts in White Australia and The Remote Aborigines have recently been published to complete the trilogy. They deal with the growth of the part- (and full-) blood as well as part-Aboriginal communities in settled and "colonial" Australia respectively — their social history, government policy, the various effects of white prejudice, the conditions of wages and housing, demography, the most important issues such as land rights, and suggestions for ways in which Aboriginal development might occur.

These books were written in 1967, following research done in 1964-65. Since then, much of their content has declined in relevance. This is especially the case with his history of the then recent developments in the Aboriginal movement; his collection of statistics on housing, wages and conditions, and the move to the capital cities; and his thorough summation of the research.

But this defect is more than compensated by his history of Aborigines from late last century — the reasons behind government policy; Aboriginal reactions to forced institutionalisation and white prejudice; and the effects of these, and of protests, on government policy in a changing world situation. There are also histories of various fringe settlements and reserves — for example, of Griffith, Bega, Kalgooilic, Palm Island and Cunnamulla, interspersed with attempts to reach a theoretical synthesis, and to recommend possible policies for these places, and in general.

In regard to social theory, Rowley attempts to combine a number of disparate streams. Goffman's work on institutions, Lewis' on the culture of poverty, Beckett's on remote Aborigines as retainers of the old Australian frontier traditions are combined with his own research on the changing patterns of white prejudice to Aborigines in the context of "white Australia". Rowley also attempts to compare Aboriginal reactions with the experiences of other colonised people and even with "more normal" Australian expressions of alienation, such as traffic offences.

This synthesis is better for its suggestibility than its coherence. Unfortunately, Rowley doesn't attempt to substantiate it by analysing and comparing the differences between the areas he researches. There is also a neglect of the importance of traditional Aboriginal social structures and customs at different times and places, and of the diachronic elements of white family, class, religious and political ideology and structure. For example, some mention is made of overt white prejudice changing from a concern over miscegenation to one over hygiene and real estate values, but not of the causes and concomitant changes of this variation. And in a liberal concern with governments as a possible force for change seems to have caused Rowley to gloss over just how different pressure groups have (and continue to) influenced various governments and departments.

One chapter that deserves mention is that on Townsville and Palm Island in the book The Remote Aborigines. The choice of this area of northern Queensland is relevant in that Townsville is considered to be in a "settled region" and where "the whole pattern of its relationship with Palm Island belongs to the frontier past". This relationship, as on other reserves, is due to the very restrictive nature of the Queensland discriminatory Act. Mention is made of the circumstances around which Palm Island was settled; its use as a penal colony to which "troublemakers" were sent; the attempts to escape from the island; the ill-fated strike in 1957 resulting in seven islanders being taken to Townsville handcuffed and so on. All very interesting and revealing.

Furthermore, Rowley examines closely the relationship of a number of Aboriginal advancement organisations. For example, the formation of the government-supported OPAL organisation was as a direct consequence of the so-called communist influence on the Queensland State Council for the Advancement of Aborigines. The former group concerned mainly with charitable functions was closely associated with the government, whereas the latter, more concerned with basic social change, had trade union links. In all, this chapter is probably one of the more detailed studies attempted.

Rowley's work as a piece of analysis from a historical perspective and, in particular, his derivation of the current situation in various areas, has been painstakingly worked on; however, his proposals for possible change lack a certain necessary diversity. Although acknowledging the traditional aspect of Aboriginal society, he sees very little place for its development as a possible alternative. Instead, emphasis on economic assistance through government aid, the formation of Aboriginal companies, appear to be the central points of possible future policy. The emergence of a number of all-Aboriginal organisations in recent years, and their emphasis on cultural identity underlines the importance of the need for an alternative life style.

To his credit, however, Rowley states that future policy must be based on Aboriginal initiative — quite rightly, he sees past government policies as being paternalistic and, as such, positively harmful. Then again, Rowley's over-emphasis on the good will of the government points to a certain degree of unjustified optimism. Governments make decisions, not on the basis of "justice" but rather on less altruistic grounds. Recent judgments on the land rights issue, despite intense protestations by pressure groups, indicate how concerned the government is with "justice". Furthermore, a notable omission has been made in that the policies of the major political parties and the interests of various pressure groups have not been examined. What policy changes might be expected (on paper at least) under a Labor Government, or what effect does the Country Party (under pressure from the graziers) have on the coalition in regard to the question of Aboriginal land ownership?

Brian Acklan
George Pick

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ILBARANA, by Donald Stuart.  
Georgian House, Melbourne, $3.50  

In considering the problems that confront the Aborigine in Australia today, the reader in search of a balanced picture of all the problem areas is faced with a great amount of material, some of it of the highest degree of relevance, some of it somewhat informative, and a great part of it of no more significance than inheres in the domestic junk that seeks to exploit the black image, usually for the profit of importers of goods Made in Japan.

Of the material in the first mentioned category most is set forth by academics. Anthropologists and sociologists have recorded vast amounts of data; surveys of physical health have been made; education and housing, work opportunities and social status, the Law in its attitudes to blacks and to whites . . . all have come under the regard of trained and concerned investigators . . . and the result has been in words, pages, volumes, quite bulky. To their credit, the various writers of this kind of material have given the general reader, as well as the specialised reader trained in one or other of the disciplines concerned, an insight into many areas of aboriginal life that would otherwise have remained in undisturbed gloom.

The great amount of material in the second category is face to face with us in almost every city bookshop. With good photography, in bindings of the highest quality, on glossy paper, but with the sparsest text, this material is meant for display on the coffee table, for occasional browsing, and is the source of much falsely based satisfaction among those whites who feel vaguely guilty about "our" "natives".

The third category needs no introduction further than to say its value is Woolworthian, Colesian, and its message a blatant downgrading of the Aborigine. A fourth category though it is small in bulk, and though it reaches a very restricted readership, consists of the outpourings of Federal and State departments charged with regulating the lives of Aborigines. These Government brochures, pamphlets, books, periodicals and other communications, can be taken as pro-Government propaganda, having no real relevance.

Beyond all these writings there is a trickle, pitifully small as yet . . . but growing . . . of poems, stories, and factual material, from people of Aboriginal descent. It is important material and will become more important.

Anyone considering the Aborigine of today should look carefully at the Aborigine of yesterday. In the time-scale of mass movements of humans from continent to continent, and the extinction of cultures by other more forceful cultures. Yesterday in Australia ended with the arrival of the first wave of European occupation of this continent. Since 1770 it has been Today, a long wearisome day of continual suffering and defeat, of degradation and deprivation, of bewilderment, and the loss of almost all the age-old culture that had been in such delicate balance with the Australian terrain.

In Ilbarana Donald Stuart attempts to show . . . and I believe he succeeds in showing . . . a brief word-picture of the scene before the coming of the European scourge. Ilbarana is seen as infant, child, young boy, growing, in his people's environment, to young manhood and the start of his moves along the road that leads to full status as "proper man". The picture of Ilbarana's life and of the physical scene so barren and arid to the readers' eyes, but so warmly embracing for those born to it and growing up loving it, is I believe, a true picture.

More important than the picture of the physical terrain, however, is the picture of the life style of the culture.

Stuart's prose has a poetic quality and the reader is liable to settle . . . in his search for satisfaction in reading . . . for the beauty of this poetic prose; but behind the skilled brushwork is a firmly, quite definitely limned depiction of a way of life in which children, in their vulnerable infancy and childhood, are the responsibility of the whole community, a way of life in which every man grows to full stature, in which no man has any opportunity to exploit any other man. To the mind of one raised in the rat-race of today's capitalistic Australia, there is a quality of socialism to be seen in the culture of the original people of this continent. Perhaps the poverty of the material life led to this by denying to the individual the chance to stand alone against his fellow men in a land that demanded co-operation at all levels as the price of survival. Whatever the origin of the socio-economic system, it was such as to allow every individual the full realisation of his potential, and Stuart weaves this thread strongly among the other threads of his story.

In the closing chapter we are shown from the viewpoint of the desert dwellers the imminent arrival of the first Europeans, five strange men with five strange beasts. The last page is a scenario, at the close of Yesterday, for all that has happened Today, the long bleak Today of 1770-1972.

All Australians old enough to read adult literature should read Ilbarana's life story. Particularly it should be read by those persons of Aboriginal descent who have been conned by our fiercely competitive callous rat-race culture into a belief in the lie of Aboriginal inferiority. This book must be placed in a category of its own.

Lyndall Hadow


The Manufacture of Madness is written by a noted American psychiatrist whose outlook resembles in some important respects those of the "anti-psychiatrists", R. D. Laing and David Cooper. Szasz's most well-known book is also his first, The Myth of Mental Illness.

In the book under review, Szasz's main thesis is that so-called "mentally ill" people today serve the same social function as did witches during the inquisition — they validate the community standards and authorities by being invalidated as evil. There is no doubt as to the existence of people who were characterised by others as witches. However, there were, in fact, no people who communed with the Devil (who, as we now know, himself never existed). Analogous, although people called "mentally ill" or "insane" do exist, it is not true that the people so designated are in fact mentally ill. Psychiatric historians, Szasz says, have regarded the "witches" as insane people with delusions. Szasz describes the "witches" as ordinary, innocent people who were oppressed by inquisitors who often thought of themselves as saving the "witches' souls. They were doing the witches a favour by torturing confessions out of them and then allowing them to be burnt at the stake, for they would now be able to live in heaven.

Szasz views the contemporary hospitalisation of "mentally ill" people against their will by well-intentioned psychiatrists as similar to this. Society has always had scapegoats whose function was to bear away the sins of society with them, thus relieving the rest of the people of the burden of their wrong-doings, and therefore, of course, of the moral responsibility for their actions. "We are good Christians," the inquisitors might have said. "Just look how many fallen souls we have saved — even though these witches might not thank us for it in this world". Replace "witches" with
“Mentally ill” or “crazy” people and we have, according to Szasz, the modern situation of institutional psychiatry. “Look how sane and righteous we are,” say the proponents to Szasz, the modern situation of institutional psychiatry. “We are helping people who are so sick that they refuse to admit the depths of their illness. They don’t want to be helped, but we are acting in their long-term best interests, not to mention those of society.”

We might summarise Szasz’s view here by slightly altering Voltaire’s famous remark about God: “If witches/mentally ill people do not exist, it is necessary to invent them.” To remain a smoothly functioning whole, societies until now have designated certain members as unfit and deserving of “treatment”. The groups most vulnerable to categorisation as insane are those who markedly deviate from the accepted norms of society, e.g. homosexuals, communists – even masturbators! No matter that quite a few people – perhaps the vast majority – fall under one or more of these headings. This simply enhances the field of power of what Szasz entitles the Mental Health Movement under the aegis of the Therapeutic State. There are twice as many people incarcerated in US mental hospitals as there are in that country’s overcrowded prisons. These people, according to Szasz, are victims to the violence engendered through the myth of mental illness. Even though there are groups of people stigmatised as sick, any one individual can earn the label and suffer consequences ranging from being strangely regarded by friends and employers through to being committed to an institution.

The book abounds in illustrations of stigmatisation and scapegoating from inquisitors and witches to psychiatrists and inmates. Unfortunately, many of the comparisons between witchcraft and mental illness where psychiatrists are the inquisitors, patients the witches, and mental illness is witchcraft, are stated rather than argued. Many things which share some characteristics with other things can be made to appear identical with them through selecting certain characteristics and rejecting others which might conflict with the identity.

Of course, if mental illness is like witchcraft in all important respects, then we should be well rid of mental hospitals together with the rest of institutional psychiatry. But the point is: is it? Does Szasz do any more than assert the similarity?

There may be many called “mentally ill” who are not. Many people are certainly scapegoated by their families or society itself into commitment to mental hospitals. As in any profession, there are good psychiatrists and bad ones. Unhappily, a goodly number of them are bad ones who are unenlightened about anything other than dosages of psychotropic drugs. The majority of mental institutions often harm their patients through maltreatment or the creation of greater problems than the patient had in the first place. But this in itself does not imply the abolition of institutional psychiatry. We must realise that, in this society, many people are greatly hurt from birth, and this produces in some a situation where they are a danger both to themselves and to others. They are not in command of themselves. Their perceptions and values are perverted by an inhuman environment. Unfortunately, I see mental hospitals with much of the associated paraphernalia as necessary in this society in trying to mend in part the harm done to so many people. Naturally, institutional psychiatry can do with an enormous amount of reform, but its abolition would be counter-productive.

Many educated, middle class Laing and Cooper reading schizoids may be hurt by the process of institutional psychiatry. But there are many people in this society who need good institutional help. There are many whose capacity for insight into their own condition has been annulled by their past.

What we need is a society which does not create the conditions where mental institutions are a necessity. It is not institutional psychiatry or the Mental Health Movement which is to blame for the sorry state of affairs many mental patients and others find themselves in. To say the fault there defines out of consideration very many people who would be dead or far more miserable outside an institution – even though they would not believe this. Symptomatically, Szasz constantly invokes John Stuart Mill to support his contentions that people always ought to be left alone. What he neglects to mention is Mill’s insistence that the ability of rational choice is denied to savages, children and the insane.

To say that there are no insane, and to act upon it would do inestimable harm to many real people. Certainly, the origins of madness rest with the social setting, but to allow that this inhuman society exists with all its psychocultural insanities, and at the same time to deny its maddening effects on many from birth through socialising agencies beginning with the family, is to deny many people some relief from an otherwise unbearable existence. Szasz does not make the link-up of “mental illness” with social structure, and I suspect that if he did, he would have to admit that the society does such great violence to many people that they are left in no shape to help themselves.

By no means do I wish to say that the present system of institutional psychiatry – whether in the US or Australia is adequate to the needs of patients. To say that vast transformations are necessary is understatement. This includes redefinitions of mental illness as much as enlightenment of psychiatrists and nurses, the abolition of shock treatment and the improvement of hospital conditions. Hospitals must cease to be instruments of social oppression and, instead, become havens from the pressures of family and society. Patients should not be treated as sub-human. Mere non-conformity and unconventionality must be defined out of the vague concept of mental illness. Where non-conformity ends and insanity begins is a question that concerns us all, particularly radicals who are those most likely to be branded by the state authorities and mass media as “mentally sick”. But the problem is not solved by denying its existence as Szasz does.

There is a great multitude of injustices in the institutional psychiatry system. But there is no black and white picture: either you support it wholly as established psychiatric practice does, or you oppose everything it stands for, as Szasz does. It is not necessary for radicals to take Szasz’s position and throw the baby out with the bath water. Of course, it is rather easy for many radicals, along with Laing in The Politics of Experience, to declare the insane sane and the sane insane because it provides a simple and iconoclastic solution (just like “Smash the State”).

The problems involved in mental illness will not be solved through the abolition of the term and concomitant practices. It can be resolved only through the arduous work of dealing with people as they are and not as we would like to think they are.

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