State and Church Involvement in Aboriginal Reserves, Missions and Stations in New South Wales, 1900-1975

and

a translation into French of


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Dedication

To acknowledge the significance of all primary sources as well as the cultural knowledge of Aboriginal children, I would like to open my work with the following story:

Once I was an egg-shell, and I thought if I could not get out I would be smothered; so I pecked at the shell until I came out, and I found myself in a soft, cosy nest made of horsehair, and lined with cobweb. It was on a tree, and in the nest were three other birds. When I came out of the egg-shell I was hungry, and a bird dropped a big caterpillar into my mouth, and I ate it up. That bird was my mother. Then, when I had wings, I felt them getting stronger, and at last I flew away, and sang, ‘Sweet pretty creature’. If anybody discovers my eggs I throw them out, because I know that naughty boys will kill my young ones if they know where my nest is. The people call me an insectivorous bird because I eat all the insects I can find. I fly on the horses backs, and there get insects to eat, and hair to make my nest with. Some people are good to me. They give my crumbs to eat and water to drink. I sing in the night as well as in the day, ‘Sweet, pretty creature,’ and sometimes I sing ‘Jirri Jirri’. There are many other birds like me who sing, ‘Sweet, pretty creature’ too. Before the [W]hite people came to Australia all of us were happy, but the naughty [W]hite children broke our eggs, and stole our babies, and threw stones at us, and [W]hite men shot at us. The [A]borigines did not kill little birds. They only killed those that they wanted to eat. If the [A]borigines’ children did pelt stones at us, the old women would say, ‘If you pelt stones at us, the little birds, the Great Spirit will turn you into stone’ and so they let us alone.¹

Contents

Acknowledgements ................................................................. iii
Dedication ........................................................................ iv
Contents ............................................................................. v-viii

Part 1 – Historical Research
List of Abbreviations ......................................................... ix
List of Tables / List of Maps ................................................ x
List of Illustrations ............................................................. xi
Abstract ............................................................................. xii-xiv

Introduction ................................................................. 2

1. The Project ................................................................. 2
2. The Translation .......................................................... 12
3. Postcolonialism and local histories ......................... 20
4. Christianity ............................................................... 29
5. Aboriginal Life Stories .............................................. 34
6. A Common Gender ................................................... 40
7. The Writer ................................................................. 41

Chapter 1 – Nineteenth Century Background ..................... 43

1. The First Missions .......................................................... 44
2. The creation of Reserves ................................................. 49
3. The first Mission Stations ............................................. 50
4. The establishment of the Aborigines’ Protection Board .... 52
5. Aboriginal Reserves – Different perspectives ................ 56
6. The Aborigines Protection Association ......................... 60
Chapter 2 – The Early Twentieth Century Aboriginal Missions ……..66

1. Establishment of the UAM and the AIM……………………………………………………………67
   • The emergence of the UAM………………………………………………………………………67
   • The organisation of the UAM………………………………………………………………………71
   • The Mission’s progress………………………………………………………………………………74
   • The newsletter – a source of information…………………………………………………………75
   • The creation of the AIM and the following strain………………………………………………78

2. One common principle: the ‘faith principle’……………………………………………………83
   • The principle and its consequences ……………………………………………………………….83
   • Its impact on the relations between Missions and Government………………………….86
     - A partnership of two White institutions………………………………………………………..86
     - A partnership at times uneasy………………………………………………………………….87

3. The Resistance of Aboriginal people ………………………………………………………………..89
4. The context of Missionaries’ involvement………………………………………………………….92

Chapter 3 – New South Wales Policies prior to 1940 .........................96

1. The Different Acts………………………………………………………………………………….96
2. The system of education………………………………………………………………………………101
3. Expulsion of Aboriginal children …………………………………………………………………102
4. Involvement of Missionaries in education………………………………………………………..107
5. Education: a major sphere of influence……………………………………………………………112
6. The Aborigines’ Protection Board (APB)…………………………………………………………113
7. The 1916 Syllabus for Aboriginal Schools…………………………………………………….115
Chapter 4 - Ambiguous Partnerships: Missions, Government and the shaping of Aboriginal Schools

1. Government’s dependence on missionaries
2. Opening of Schools
3. Teachers’ appointments
4. The Syllabus – Sphere of full Collaboration

Chapter 5 – Missionary Endeavours and Government Policies, 1900 – late 1930s

1. The Missions’ Newsletters
   • Right to have access to Public School
   • Discrimination and lack of interest
2. Country Town Newspapers and Public Opinion – A context
3. The APB and Female Missionaries
4. Conflicts between Missionaries and Representatives of the Government
5. The Policy of Removal
6. Missions and Aboriginal children – One step further
7. Missions’ Will to affirm their Autonomy
8. Conflicts between Secular and Religious duties
9. Missions and Political Activism
10. Political Neutrality of the Missions
11. Refusal of any State Control
12. Late 1930s – The Government’s Will to Control the Missions

Chapter 6 – Notion of Citizenship: Church and Government Interventions, 1937-1950

1. Apathy of the White Community
2. Education
3. The notion of ‘full civil rights’ for Aborigines
4. ‘Indolence and absence of a sense of responsibility’
5. The administration ................................................................. 229

Chapter 7 – Towards Integration, 1950s-1975 ........................................... 236

1. Dawn, an education tool .............................................................. 237
2. Social Responsibility ................................................................. 243
3. Education ............................................................................. 247
4. Citizens’ Association ................................................................. 249
5. Indigenous Churches ............................................................... 250
6. Missions’ Demise .................................................................... 253
7. The Board and religious activities .............................................. 258
8. Status of Government Stations .................................................. 261
9. Integration – A new Policy ...................................................... 265

Conclusion .................................................................................. 269

Appendices .................................................................................. 275

Appendix 1 - Excerpts of the Rules and Conditions governing the work of Missionaries on Aboriginal Reserves ................................................................. 275
Appendix 2 - Operation of Missionaries and Religious Organisations on Aboriginal Stations and Reserves .................................................. 277
Appendix 3 – Table with Alphabetical List of Aboriginal Schools ............ 279-283

Bibliography .................................................................................. 284-301

Part 2 – Translation ..................................................................... 302
List of Abbreviations

APA - Association for the Protection of the Aborigines - New South Wales Aborigines Protection Association (1880) – private voluntary organisation

AAPA - Australian Aboriginal Progressive Association organised in 1925 by Fred Maynard

AAL – Australian Aborigines’ League, established in 1932 by William Cooper.

APA – Aborigines’ Progressive Association launched at a public meeting in Dubbo (June 1937), President John Patten.

APB – Aborigines’ Protection Board

AWB – Aborigines’ Welfare Board

AIM – Aborigines’ Inland Mission later Australian Indigenous Ministries

UAM – United Aborigines’ Mission or AAM – Australian Aborigines’ Mission
Tables

Table [1-1] - Population in Aboriginal ‘stations and camps under the control of Local Boards’………………………………………………………………………..16-17

Table [1-2] - Further information given about the Aboriginal population in *The Official Year Book of New South Wales*……………………………………….19

Table [1-3] - The number of Aboriginal people and their age (1915-1917)………………19

Table [3-1] - Number of Aboriginal schools and number of pupils attending Public Schools………………………………………………………………………..105

Table [4-1] - Number of single women working in Aboriginal reserves………………..132

Table [4-2] - Occupations of single women in reserves…………………………………..132

Table [4-3] - Appointments as teacher and/or manager…………………………………139

Table [4-4] - Decade of the appointment as teacher and/or manager………………..139

Table [7-1] - Couples appointed manager/matron and time spent working in Aboriginal Reserves………………………………………………………………………..241

Table [7-2] - Placement of wards admitted and committed from 1953 to 1958………..246

Maps

Map 1 - New South Wales Aboriginal Reserves with Missions……………………………1

Map 2 - Christian Missions 1870-1960……………………………………………………………..27

Map 3 - Map locating the Aborigines’ Inland Mission and the United Aborigines’ Mission in New South Wales……………………………………………28

Map 4 - Map locating New South Wales Aboriginal Schools……………………………106

Map 5 – Map locating Aboriginal Schools and the AIM and UAM Missions……………112

Map 6 – 1936 AIM Field Map……………………………………………………………………219
Map 7– The United Aborigines’ Mission in Australia (1956)……………………………233
Map 8 – The three AIM New South Wales’ districts (1954)…………………………….251

Illustrations

1- Bobby Peters at the time of the opening of the Church Building Darlington Point,
c.1930……………………………………………………………………………………………8
2 - Missionaries Cabin and Mission Church, Long Gully (Tingha) app. 1933…………9
3 - Old Church and Log Cabin, Long Gully. Tingha, January 1937……………………9
4 - New Church. AIM Long Gully, Tingha. Opened 28.08.1935…………………………10
5 - The sewing class – Toomelah (Boomi) Miss M. McAulay and Miss Eadie, AIM
    Missionaries, May 1934……………………………………………………………………25
6 - AIM Missionaries - 1927 Conference……………………………………………………83
7 - Headings of the monthly newsletters published by the UAM…………………………145
8 - Heading of the newsletter published by the AIM (1950)…………………………….146
9 - New heading of the newsletter published by the AIM (1952)………………………147
10 - A group of the Walcha people round the Memorial Van with Mr. W. A. Long,
    January 1937…………………………………………………………………………………217
11 - Bible Training Institute……………………………………………………………………220
12 - Bert Marr, Dawn, March 1956, Cover page…………………………………………223
13 - Cover Page, Dawn, December 1961…………………………………………………..257
Abstract

In this study, we examine the involvement of Churches and Government in New South Wales Aboriginal Reserves and Stations during the twentieth century (1900-1975). Two non-denominational Missions, the United Aborigines’ Mission (UAM) also called the Australian Aborigines’ Mission (AAM) and the Australian Inland Mission (AIM) were particularly active and they both started their work in New South Wales before extending it into other Australian States. Their action in New South Wales was distinctive because it mostly involved women and the missionaries were sent to live with Aboriginal communities. Therefore, unlike the ‘strictly authoritarian’ approach adopted in Northern Territory or Western Australia, missionaries in NSW lived by themselves among people who had settled in Reserves and maintained as much as possible a sense of community.

The establishment of Aboriginal Schools gave Missions the opportunity to strengthen their influence among the communities. Elementary education was at the core of the intervention of the Government and the Missions. While the Missions’ involvement was accepted and even encouraged by the State Government at first, as soon as its agency, the Aborigines’ Protection Board was given the legislative power to control Aboriginal people, the Missions were induced to confine themselves to the religious sphere. The study demonstrates that while the White institutions sought to extend their authority over Aboriginal people, the latter were asserting their agency. Thus, some communities appear to have embraced evangelical forms of Christianity when the control of the administration was reaching its peak. As government managers were sent in Aboriginal reserves, in the 1930s, exclusive Native Church Conventions gained momentum.

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2 Andrew Markus, Governing Savages (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1990), 74.
In 1940, the new agency of the Government, the Aborigines’ Welfare Board, aimed at implementing a new policy: the assimilation of Aboriginal people. From that time, the Government became reluctant about the involvement of the Missions and encouraged town local denominational churches to open their congregations to accept Aborigines. This attempt failed as neither the Black nor the White congregations were disposed to integrate.

Thus the study highlights how the relations between the Church and the Government ebbed and flowed as both institutions wanted to assert their control over New South Wales Aboriginal communities. The research also demonstrates how Aboriginal people were able to resist within the constraints, revealing a constant negotiation - overt but also concealed - between these three groups.

The translation into French of an Australian history book about the relations between Aboriginal people and Europeans is closely related to the historical research. Indeed, the Manning Valley was one of the places where the Missions and later on the Native Churches were particularly influential. Therefore some people like Ella Simon and Bert Marr are present in both works - the thesis and the history book. It seems appropriate to end the thesis with the translation of an interview given by Ella Simon. As always she talks proudly of her Aboriginal culture and at times continues without addressing the interviewer’s question. Thus when the interviewer asked if she is telling a ‘true story and not a legend’, her only answer is: ‘it’s about Forster.’

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The translation will hopefully offer a more informed view of Australian history and more specifically Aboriginal-European relations to a francophone readership. Although aware that ‘rewriting is a manipulation undertaken in the service of power’, we would like to think that ‘in its positive aspect’, rewriting or translating ‘can help in the evolution of a literature and a society.’

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