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FORUM

# HOW WRONG IS XAVIER HERBERT?

*The Case for the Aborigines*

## 1—A Place Like Tranby

*[I]t is ungrateful of Mr Xavier Herbert to abuse the aborigines after so many years, for the lust, drunkenness and misery out of which he has made his writing reputation. Also in "A Town Like Elliott" he exhibits the Puritan's confusion between morality and economics.*

If you refuse to lurk at Mr Herbert's upper window, with your ear flapping for the aborigines' diuretic and copulative goings-on behind the pub, then he has another complaint: The unhygienic conditions of the "Boongville" camps, infested with "hookworm, ringworm, impetigo, pediculosis, gastro-enteritis and TB because there is no sanitation."

Instead of making these squalid conditions an excuse for the cry, "There is No Solution to the Aborigines' Problem," I should have thought they offered urgent reason why they should be wiped out rather than the poor devils whose apathy and disease result from them. "The race," Mr Herbert complains, "which I was brought up to believe was doomed to swift extinction is now explosive to proliferation." Disappointing, no doubt, but no Government or health officer can afford the personal pessimism of our author who washes his hands of the whole issue. His lifetime study has brought him to the conclusion that the aborigines, mixed-bloods and full-bloods, want "their own way of living." So what? Doesn't he? Don't Greeks, Italians, Jews, want their own way of living within the Australian frame? Are they the worse citizens because they retain racial and religious customs and pride?

The problems of the aborigines largely arise because their highly moral and economically efficient society was destroyed with little they could understand to take its place. Their way of living was a co-operative one and not a competitive one. By patient teaching and skilled advice it is possible to give both full-bloods and mixed-bloods a way of life which satisfies their need to belong to their own racial groups and yet work as modern economic units.

Last week the Numbahging (Cabbage Tree Island) Aborigines Rural Co-opera-

tive paid its first dividend. In November it will harvest its first crop of sugar cane. Apart from the Island land the Co-operative leases 1500 acres on the mainland. It runs a co-operative store with a bank and post office with the first aboriginal to become a Commonwealth postmaster.

The directors of the co-operative were given a course of management in Sydney at Tranby Aborigines Co-operative Centre. They went on a tour sponsored by the Wholesale Co-operative Society so that they could learn buying, the attractive setting out of goods and the fine points of running a business. At Cabbage Tree Island the aborigines attended classes at night under Russ McCrohan, the schoolteacher, on how to form a co-operative. On a shoestring, of course, they have hammered out a way of working together that gives them satisfaction and self-respect.

Behind their success is goodwill, a goodwill that is unfortunately lacking in "A Town Like Elliott." It was the goodwill of local farmers who helped plough and lent their implements when the co-op. was too poor to buy its own. It was the goodwill of the A.B.M. Co-operative Board which scraped together the initial capital for the store. It was white goodwill which set up Tranby Aborigines Co-operative Training Centre at Glebe, Sydney, where full-bloods, mixed-bloods, half-castes, Torres Strait Islanders live with white Australian university and college students while they learn not only skilled trades, but the techniques of leadership in co-operation among their own people.

To give these young people scholarships to Tranby all kinds of church and social organisations, trade unions and business groups have helped. The NSW Aborigines Welfare Board has given its support and the Minister for Housing



and Co-operatives has granted £5000 for building extensions. The Directors of the A.B.M. Christian Co-operative Board are hard-headed people. They know this is a long-term venture but believe the results will justify the labor and money. At the present time preliminary work in the establishment of co-operatives is being undertaken at Condoblin, Murrumbidgee and Tabulam.

Sydney University's Adult Education Board threw its goodwill into the holding of the last Tranby Summer School to which came Government and mission employees, aborigines from all States. In residence at Tranby today are 10 scholarship holders from Mitchell River (Cape York), Tabulam, Cabbage Tree Island, Raleigh, Torres Strait Islands, Kempsey.

Anthropologists now agree that group ownership is more in line with aboriginal economic concepts than individual ownership. Our State and Federal Government departments are being persuaded by the success of co-operatives in other countries among primitive people and are coming to study this other alternative to the "swift extinction" or assimilation "by scattering" which was offered in the 19th century where Mr Herbert still lurks.

Mr Paul Hasluck, whose work might well be studied in Queensland, is setting up a pilot consumers' co-operative in the Northern Territory. In North-Western Australia the co-operative idea is warmly welcomed by missionary bodies, both Protestant and Roman Catholic. The Catholics have a powerful example in the work of the Antigonish Movement centred at St Francis Xavier University, Nova Scotia. I have before me copies of the Ordinances of 1958 and 1959 by which the Canadian Government has helped set up 12 co-operatives among their aboriginal people, the Eskimos, resulting in the financial year 1960-61 of a return of 85,000 dollars to the small scattered tribes.

Tranby's director, the Rev. "Alf" Clint, will next year have a trained aboriginal assistant going out to instruct his people; and a trained aboriginal secretary from the Associated Girls' Centre, Durangaling. Dee Why, where young women (and very pretty, the present half-dozen are) train as typists, secretaries, store managers. This is a very different picture from Herbert's slave prostitutes and a

possible one for Queensland, as it is for NSW.

These young men and women are not merely a trained "elite" cut off from their own kind. They are there with the wishes and hopes of their people behind them. No two have the same problems, but they are trained to the idea that their *whole group* must come up, little by little, rather than individuals cutting free to compete with whites.

It is hard, patient, long-distance work. The only thing that would prevent its success in Queensland would be, not the aborigines, but a preponderance of people like Mr Herbert whose egotism is fed by the contemplation of someone else's supposedly insoluble misery.

Mr Herbert's quaint account of how he pestered out of a mixed-blood the admission that he would like to eat a Chinaman shows just how naïf some white men can be. An aboriginal, like most primitive people, will always agree with you, agree most politely, reserving the right to consider you quite crazy.

As an antidote to Mr Herbert, T. G. H. Strehlow's well-balanced pamphlet, "Nomads in No Man's Land," deals with full-

blood aborigines and is the result of this Commonwealth Patrol Officer's many years of observation and experience. He was born at Hermannsburg and watched Albert Namatjira from boyhood to his tragic nemesis. Strehlow draws the simple conclusion that no aboriginal or mixed-blood can cut himself off from his group to stand alone. The whites who patronised Namatjira did not understand the ties and tribal obligations he owed to his own people.

At Tranby there is a young aboriginal artist from the Gulf country of Queensland. He is studying art at East Sydney Technical College. He will never expect to "go it alone," nor will he be asked to do so. The tribal and racial group is basic. The economy must fit the pattern that suits the people.

In some places five years of training and adult education have gone on before the people themselves understood and asked for a co-operative venture of their own. Patience, long-distance work, goodwill, all are needed. And for the individual pessimist—the exercise of a sense of humor.

KYLIE TENNANT

## 2—"Name One Town"

By KEN BRINDLE

(Secretary, All Blacks Football Club, Redfern, Sydney)

*AS a half-caste aboriginal, I challenge the claim by Xavier Herbert that there is no solution to the aborigines' problem "except to go back to our own way of living," which to him means eating Chinamen. Mr Herbert will probably object to my use of "us" in this article since I'm a half-caste and he says there is an enormous difference between the true black man and the lighter colored cross-breed. So let me tell Mr Herbert why cross-breeds (like me) who have lived in fringe settlements, feel that articles such as his, slander "us" along with the full-bloods.*

Nearly every half, quarter, or lesser caste aboriginal has grown up on a Government Reserve, mission station, or fringe settlement because their white fathers, grandfathers, or remoter ancestors just dumped them there with their full-blood mothers when they'd had their fun. They were not taken into their father's white home and recognised as his children, educated and cared for, but the "semi-human" blacks, to use Herbert's words, brought them up along with their own full-blood kids. So we feel, most of us, that we belong with the blacks, not with the whites who ditched our mothers, grandmothers, or great grandmothers, and we say "we" when talking about aborigines — full-bloods or lesser castes. (I won't discuss the quality of the white blood to be found in a lot of the places in North Queensland

and the Northern Territory. I'm sure Mr Herbert knows more about that than I do.)

In the Northern Territory these days, if you've got a spot of white blood you're a citizen, if you're a full-blood you're a ward.

In Queensland if you're a full-blood, even if you're exempted from the act, you still don't get a vote; that's reserved for the whites, the naturalised new Australians and the half-blacks. Mr Herbert and Mr Hasluck did not have to think this one up — Hitler and the South Africans got in first.

An article like Mr Herbert's (who had a black nurse like all of us) does a lot of harm. They tell me he's well known and he talks about Queensland and the Northern Territory as places he's lived in, and about the aborigines as people

he's known. A lot of people who've never met an aboriginal will think he knows what he's talking about and will turn a deaf ear when we ask for full citizenship, for equal pay, for a decent chance for our kids. And believe me, in a country like Australia, with a strong color bar, just an off-white skin starts you off with a big disadvantage.

People like Mr Herbert writing about aborigines living in foul humpies and feeding like dogs, and, with dogs, becoming more and more degenerate, helps to put all of us, mixed and full-bloods, still further down the scale than the Asians, Indians, and Malaysians whom the Government welcomes under the Colombo Plan.

I'm not educated like Mr Herbert. I only went to sixth class at school. Although I wanted to further my education then, the Aborigines Protection Board bundled me off to work on a sheep station near Tamworth for about £3 per month, plus keep. But I picked up a bit of extra education in the Army, and I worked 12 hours a day (because I needed the overtime) machine setting. But I'd like to go through his article and nail the lies in it.

If an uneducated aboriginal (black with a small "b" to Mr Herbert) like me can find out the legal position of aborigines and their rights and lack of them, Mr Herbert could do the same.

He says the aboriginal fringe settlement (Boongville) "is a state that suits the race so well that they might have stuck to it generation in and generation out." Let Mr Herbert tell me what alternative my people had when they were driven off their tribal lands, their society disrupted, forbidden to hunt their food because they might disturb the grazing cattle.

Let him name one town in the whole of Australia that has welcomed them on an equal basis as human beings. When they were evicted from their lands they were given only one choice — to stay and become unpaid workers, except for handouts on the cattle stations, or be hunted away, or shot, or poisoned.

That was in the past, people say. The past is pretty recent for aborigines. It's only in the last few years that Governments and people have become worried about our conditions and started housing and training schemes.

Mr Herbert says we have it soft today, with full social benefits and full citizenship if we really want it, full pay and all. Let's just take Queensland and the Northern Territory which Mr Herbert mostly talks about. It was only late in 1959 that the Commonwealth Government included full-bloods for full social service benefits, and in these two States the number who handle their own social

services money could probably be counted on two hands. Perhaps he could tell me how many get unemployment relief, although for thousands there's no work to be had.

Full citizenship is a joke. Even in NSW, aborigines, mixed as well as full-bloods, don't have it unless they apply for an exemption ticket — or a dog's licence as it is more commonly known — and that can be taken away whenever the Welfare Board feels like it; and there are only about 200 full-bloods in NSW.

Full Pay? In Queensland there is a special award for aboriginal pastoral workers (which most aborigines work at), much lower than the white ward, and the aboriginal doesn't control his own wages, as low as they are.

Full Rights? On Queensland settlements the aboriginal can't marry without permission. He can be directed to work for 32 hours a week for food and lodging only, or directed to a job outside the settlement. He can't leave the settlement without permission. His children are under the legal guardianship of the Director of Aboriginal Affairs. He can't vote. He doesn't get a legal trial, but can be banished to Palm Island on the say-so of the Superintendent. Remember the Jim Jacko (flogging) case?

In the Northern Territory nearly all full-bloods are "wards," and their lives are controlled by white authorities. Just have a look at the scale of wages for aboriginal workers and then talk about full pay.

Agricultural £2 per week; building £5;

domestic £2; droving-plant and stock £10; droving-plant only £5; pastoral, timber, transport, £2; municipal £3 10s.; mining underground £6.

Mr Herbert says aborigines live by prostitution of their womenfolk and semi-beggary. I think he knows how much choice the aborigines and their wives had with some of the types to be found in Northern Australia. As to semi-beggary, with no skills, no jobs, would he rather they starved? I wonder what he would have done under the same circumstances.

HE says that North Queensland black children have been going to school with white for a couple of generations. A very few might. About 50% still live on Government settlements or Mission Reserves; and teachers at aboriginal schools in Queensland don't have to have any qualifications.

The Australian Board of Missions publishes "Focus," which says that the Diocese of Carpentaria wants the Queensland Department of Education to take over the schooling. The Rev B. I. Chiu writes of appalling conditions in schools for aborigines, and says inadequacies in staffing school buildings and teaching systems and facilities have plunged the schools into educational darkness.

The aboriginal teachers in these schools, he says, "have all only been through these schools themselves, with one exception. As a result, no aboriginal child who has successfully completed the primary classes in the aboriginal mission schools can take his place even in a

class of white children four or five years younger than himself. Who would call this equal schooling?"

And when aboriginal parents and the Northern Territory Government want to give the full-blood children of Elliott the reality of equal schooling with a trained teacher, Mr Herbert talks of them as a people doomed to non-progress, the poorest of poor who will be with us always; the boongs, and stinkers. This must come pretty close to libelling the aborigines of Elliott.

Then Mr Herbert ends with the story of Charlie, the full-blood who had all the chances in life and ended up in a filthy fringe settlement with only one ambition, to be like his great grandfather and eat a Chinaman.

I could end my article with a story of a degenerate pure white, who wouldn't change his chance of a doss in Sydney's night refuge for a mansion on Potts Point, but I wouldn't condemn the whole white race on these grounds. Instead I'll ask Mr Herbert why he doesn't take a look at the aborigines, mostly full-bloods, who are battling to run their own co-operative in some of the poorest country in Australia. It's so poor, the whites don't want it unless minerals or oil are found there. If this happens the aborigines will be tipped out as they have been at Weipa and Mapoon, without compensation, to become fringe dwellers without hope or help.

Why doesn't he look at the aborigines in Darwin who have formed their own association to battle for full rights? If we've got it so good, why am I and a lot of other aborigines, both half and full-bloods and also white people, going to a National Conference in Adelaide at Easter to put forward plans for helping my people? I'm going because in NSW my people are still second-class citizens, and because my full-blood brothers in other States have even less rights than we have here.

I think all Australians should know these things, and I think every decent Australian will help us. The white way of life is not the only one, and where aborigines are a large proportion of the community, as they are in the north, they should not be compelled to assimilate.

When they know enough about the white way, and not just what they have learned in the past from the many white dead-beats and drunks in these places, they can make their own decision. At present, driven off their tribal lands, herded into settlements with white supervisors—or should I say dictators?—their children taught in a foreign language, and with no possibility of a job for the great majority of them, is it any wonder they are confused? And is it any wonder that we think it's time aborigines had a say in their own affairs?

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