

## BOOK REVIEWS

*Black Death White Hands* by Paul Wilson (George Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1982) pp. vii-ix, 1-145, Index 146-150. Price \$17.95 (hardback), \$8.95 (soft cover), ISBN 0 86861 300 2; 0 86861 308 8 (paperback).

Paul Wilson, a Reader in Sociology at the University of Queensland, was a key witness for the defence in the trial of Alwyn Peter in the Queensland Supreme Court in September 1981. The *Peter* trial decision remains unreported but has generated wider interest<sup>1</sup> in the peculiar social plight of the reservation Aborigines and the almost unbelievable story of alcoholism, self-mutilation and domestic violence which is theirs alone in an otherwise privileged country. *Black Death White Hands* is another of the literary progeny of the *Peter* case, drawing heavily on the research conducted for the defence in that trial by solicitor Peter Clapin, junior counsel Frank Brennan and Wilson's own research in that context.

The author frankly confesses that it was the Alwyn Peter story that 'fuelled me to write this book'. The picture it paints is a bleak one and the rage maintained by the author throughout the book could only come from someone who has lived and worked with the problem he describes. The purpose he serves in writing his sociological study of the violence in Aboriginal communities is stated bluntly in the concluding statement of his introduction:

If we as a nation are to balance the books, to show that we have a human as well as a materialistic face, we will have to deal honestly with the causes of black violence no matter how painful this may be. Only when we have done this, can we propose realistic and constructive policies designed to stop black men and women from killing each other.<sup>2</sup>

This book provides a good starting point for formulating a rational plan of attack on the root causes of the problems. To describe the difficulties facing the Aboriginal people as evils of their own creation is clearly wrong in the author's view. The blame for their plight lies with all of us; as Wilson states 'a central thesis of the research discussed in these pages is that white Australians have created historical and social conditions which are violence-provoking'.<sup>3</sup> It is not enough, in Wilson's view, merely to recognize that the violence which his research highlights is that of black killing black. Our responsibility as white Australians runs much deeper because '[w]hites have, by political, legal and sometimes police action, created conditions which foster murder and assault in Aboriginal communities'.<sup>4</sup>

Wilson's research tries to make the complex patterns of violence on Aboriginal reserves comprehensible to the lay reader, who is necessarily likely to be unfamiliar with the environment in which it occurs. He isolates what he calls 'high-violence reserves' and enumerates the common characteristics of these areas. Legally available alcohol, over-crowding, only low to medium levels of traditional culture remaining and the presence of large numbers of displaced Aborigines from other areas seem to be the critical factors. Wilson goes on to explain why these ingredients can be so volatile:

combined with poor employment, health and housing conditions on white-owned and white-controlled Aboriginal communities, produce community disintegration,

<sup>1</sup> See for example the recent case-note at (1982) 13 *M.U.L.R.* 648.

<sup>2</sup> Wilson P., *Black Hands White Death*, Introduction, ix.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* 7.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* 9.

purposelessness and feelings of personal worthlessness. Such a condition has an inevitable result: people become violent towards others and themselves.<sup>5</sup>

One critical factor in the fragmentation of Aboriginal culture and the lowering of personal dignity of the Aborigine in his own eyes and those of white Australians is the endemic alcoholism on reserves. The House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs found that 90 per cent of men and 80 per cent of women on some Aboriginal reserves were heavy drinkers. By 'heavy' drinking most of the research conducted assumes an intake of at least ten bottles of beer or six bottles of wine a day. This is a drinking problem on a collective basis which few white Australians could comprehend. The role of the law in this problem has not been beyond reproach and the generally prescribed treatment for drunkenness has been imprisonment for periods and on a scale that the white community would simply not tolerate.

Where lie the solutions to these massive problems? Wilson rejects anything which smacks of white paternalism, for this only further reduces Aboriginal self-esteem and sense of purpose. Aboriginal self-control and self-management of his own land and his own destiny are the only way out of the maze of despair and violence the author's research chronicles. Wilson says that white Australians have no part to play in this regeneration process and even though they may be well-meaning they should keep out. Given the large degree of Europeanisation that has already taken place a reader might justifiably query how realistic this stand is. After all, we cannot revert to a pre-1788 scenario. The problems which the Aboriginal people face as 1988 approaches are vastly more complicated than ever before. Given their current plight, the capacity of black Australians to determine their own future, even if they could, remains doubtful.

Wilson's belief that the Aborigine can solve his own problems if given the opportunity is a refreshing note on which to conclude a commentary filled with distressing and depressing factual material. The book is an honest and deeply felt plea to all Australians to look beyond the superficial aspects of Aboriginal degradation and try to understand why it exists and what can be done to provide constructive solutions.

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*The Constitutional Challenge* edited by Michael James (Centre for Independent Studies, Sydney, 1982) pp. i-viii, 1-163, Index 165-166. Price: \$7.95, ISBN 0 949769 01 0.

This book is subtitled *Essays on the Australian Constitution, Constitutionalism and Parliamentary Practice*. In the preface, Greg Lindsay, executive director of the Centre for Independent Studies (CIS), comments that '[i]n Australia today, the Constitution is no doubt under more informed discussion than for decades'. Amongst other things he probably had in mind regular contributions on the topic from the left side of politics which have been relatively plentiful. An early and important work in the contemporary debate was *Labor and the Constitution*<sup>1</sup> and the regular appearance since of *Labor Essays*<sup>2</sup> continues the process begun by the former publication whilst reviewing numbers of other issues as well.

The CIS represents an important focus for academics and intellectuals tending towards and of the political right in Australia. *The Constitutional Challenge* is a welcome monograph if only because such written works putting constitutional views

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* 21.

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<sup>1</sup> Evans G. (Ed.) (1977).

<sup>2</sup> *Labor Essays 1980*, Evans and Reeves (eds); *Labor Essays 1981*, Evans, Reeves and Malbon (eds); *Labor Essays 1982*, Reeves and Evans (eds).