

Librarians, records and the stolen children debate

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At Darlington Point I have heard an Aborigine who was highly educated, explaining in the best of English how the Aborigines were plundered of their rations, robbed of their lands, and reduced to the position of slaves... (Mr Scobie MP during parliamentary debate on the *Aborigines Protection Bill 1915*, cited in *Bringing them home: report of the national inquiry into the separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families*, Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997, p39).

Eighty years later, how could we not have known? In the weeks that followed the release of the *Stolen children* report, that question has been repeated in shocked tones all around Australia. If these terrible things happened so often, for so long, over so much of the country, how could so many of us have remained in ignorance of them? And what measures are we taking now to ensure this collective blind-spot is obliterated from our national consciousness? What is the role of the local historian in promoting community understanding, surely the first prerequisite for reconciliation?

If it is true that we need a clear-eyed view of the past in order to develop informed judgement, values and actions impinging on the future, then *Bringing them home* may prove to be one of the most influential books published in Australia this decade. Through its careful sifting of archival records and collection and presentation of oral testimonies, it has rocketed local histories into community consciousness across the nation.

But we all should have known much of it long before this. Detailed evidence has been available for years in primary source material: letters, diaries, police records, court reports, official correspondence. The recent burgeoning of eyewitness oral histories allied to the current emphasis on social history has swelled the mass of evidence, but still it seems many of us simply did not know. In Pauline Hanson's multicultural Australia, not all of us have grown up with any knowledge of battlers, Banjo Paterson or even a glimpse of the richness of Aboriginal culture. Yet a broad, common vision and a basic level of shared knowledge and understanding are essential to any sense of national cohesion. On a smaller, more local scale, they are also

vital to the well-being of each community. We may not agree on future directions, but at least we should all know something of our past in order to tease out implications to help us understand the present, and inform decision-making in the future.

Happily, it seems that renewed interest and official support for local studies and heritage issues may well be underway. Increasingly, local governments are setting aside grants for heritage projects. Heritage trails and information kits are being provided. Local studies — geographical, environmental and historical — are now included in school curricula in every state, and local studies publications are booming.

Two recent examples from Western Australia illustrate the strength of the local studies publishing trend. Early this year, Professor Geoffrey Bolton produced his long-awaited *Daphne Street* (Fremantle Arts Centre Press), a charming, affectionate, and academically rigorous study of the North Perth street in which the Bolton family lived. At the top end of the state, Windjana Gorge in the West Kimberley provided the setting for the 1996 WA Premier's Literary Award winner, *Jandamarra and the Bunaba resistance* (Magabala Books), by Howard Pedersen and Banjo Woorunmurra. This tells, clearly, simply, but with stunning intensity, the story of the Bunaba leader known to modern tourists and to turn of the century police and pastoralists as the outlawed Pigeon, scourge of the Napier Ranges. The co-authors set the story in its true perspective, showing the growing conflict between traditional owners and newcomers who saw nothing wrong in forcing the Bunaba off their land and into service on the newly created pastoral properties.

Perhaps it's time for Australians to forget the 'tall poppy' syndrome and learn instead to give credit where credit's due. If we all researched, wrote or read our own local studies, wouldn't our local community life be so much richer? Wouldn't we have a better appreciation of the social and cultural issues that both divide and unite us? And knowing this, wouldn't we be likely to make more appropriate decisions to benefit our communities in the future? That, it seems to me, is the unique strength of local studies. ■

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