DIFFERENT
WHITE PEOPLE
For my children Sarah and Brandon
and in memory of Bob Wilson
Different White People is an important addition to the literature on the enduring fight for Aboriginal rights. But it also adds to the wider national story of political activism and the role of left wing unions and the Communist Party in particular. This is an aspect of Australian politics which has largely been forgotten and which sharply distinguishes the years during and after the Second World War from the succeeding period leading up to the end of the twentieth century. So significant and distinctive was the politics of this era that Deborah Wilson’s account provides an essential component for a coherent understanding of the troubled history of relations between indigenous and settler Australians. And that story runs through the experience of every generation since 1788.

There have been different white people from the start, and they can be found in every generation and in all parts of the continent. They were distinguished by their adoption of racial attitudes which often varied widely from common views of their contemporaries. They were often more sympathetic towards the Aborigines and were, as a result, sometime critics of the whole colonial project. Their often outspoken advocacy did not win friends and they were shunned and abused. But they could not be ignored. There was too much to trouble even the toughest conscience. Violence along the frontiers of settlement accompanied Australian life for 140 years. Aboriginal despair and deprivation was all too apparent and enduring.
The different white people were often loners and eccentrics, but they usually drew inspiration from quite respectable intellectual traditions and from currents of opinion prominent overseas and particularly in Britain. Religion was the most common source of dissent. Christian missionaries from the great European mission societies played prominent roles in all the colonies establishing institutions and providing succour as well as the promise of salvation. Christian doctrine was important because it contained the message of racial equality and the belief that all of humankind was of one blood and, all alike, capable of salvation. During the nineteenth century the friends of the Aborigines, as they were often known, drew strength from what they saw as the central tradition of the English common law, which suggested that all the subjects of the Crown should be considered as equal regardless of racial difference. Britain too became the leading opponent of global slavery after the Empire-wide abolition of the institution in 1833. To many colonial dissidents, the Aborigines were treated in ways indistinguishable from slavery.

But for all the earnest advocacy of the different white people, the dispossession of the tribes proceeded without a pause. Frontier violence continued into the first third of the twentieth century and the colonial, and state, governments established systems of control and protection which removed all legal rights from Aboriginal communities. But new generations of dissidents emerged, drawing inspiration as their forebears had done from Christianity. And new ideas were added to the mix. The League of Nations introduced the idea of trusteeship and took strong stands against slavery and forced labour. But the greatest force for change came from the development of human rights during the years between the two world wars, culminating in the establishment of the United Nations in 1945 and the drafting of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. Running parallel with these developments was the sudden surge in decolonisation in the 1940s and 1950s. These were all developments which inevitably influenced Australian attitudes and policies and provided inspiration for the new
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generation of activists. The total collapse after 1945 of the idea of racial difference and hierarchy (following the revelation of the Holocaust) forced a complete transformation of Australian thinking long premised on ideas of Aboriginal inferiority and primitiveness.

Much of the activism so well related by Deborah Wilson came from the left of the political stage. By the early twentieth century there were assorted socialist clubs and societies, members of which challenged contemporary ideas about race and Aboriginality. But the most powerful new force came from the men and women inspired by Marxism with its message of liberation from Imperial domination and, above all, by the way in which it overturned the prevailing ideas about race and hierarchy. Whereas racial doctrine pictured the world as divided vertically and hierarchically by race, Marxists saw the great divisions as horizontal; distinguishing class from class. Oppression and domination arose not from biology but from politics and economics, and therefore open to challenge and change.

It was not surprising, then, that Australian communists took up the Aboriginal cause in the 1920s and 1930s, and even more effectively in the 1940s while the party retained some of the authority and prestige gained as a result of the great and victorious alliance between the Soviet Union and the Western Powers. And this is the story which fills the colourful, dramatic pages of Different White People. It will bring back an almost forgotten era for older Australians, and introduce younger readers to a time of dynamic political development which makes contemporary politics look dull and conformist. For there is no doubt that Australian political life benefitted from the presence of a well-organised radical left wing party with a professional cadre dedicated to change. The Cold War dramatically affected the role and status of the Communist Party, and eventually removed it far beyond the political mainstream. The dream of a socialist Australia faded away. In that sense, the communists failed completely. But their activism for Aboriginal advancement had lasting benefits. Australia was a much better place as a result.
So this is a story of significance although it concentrates on one issue during a single generation. But the central theme remains highly relevant today. Australians still give earnest attention to the question of reconciliation, and we are currently engaged in a national debate about the constitutional recognition of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders. Most of the activists in this engaging study have passed away or have retired from active political engagement, but their legacy lives on. They have found in Deborah Wilson a judicious and worthy chronicler of their crusade.

Henry Reynolds
June 2015.
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When I embarked on this project of research and writing in 2009, the most enthusiastic supporter was my father. Whilst on his annual visit from Coffs Harbour to Tasmania a year later to visit me and my kids, he became gravely ill. Emergency surgery in Launceston revealed advanced bowel cancer. Six weeks later, I took a frail but doggedly determined man back up to New South Wales. He died four months later, aged eighty-one. I hope I have done him proud. Vale Bob Wilson.

The past five years or so have been incredibly challenging in many ways. I love and thank my children Sarah and Brandon for trying to understand just how tough it has been.

I hope I have inspired them to reach for the stars.
ABBREVIATIONS

AAL Aboriginal Advancement League
ABSCHOL Aboriginal Scholarship Society
ACTU Australian Council of Trade Unions
AEU Amalgamated Engineering Union
AIATSIS Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies
AMIEU Australasian Meat Industry Employees’ Union
APC Australian Peace Council
ASIO Australian Security Intelligence Organisation
AWU Australian Workers’ Union
BWIU Building Workers’ Industrial Union of Australia
CAR Council for Aboriginal Rights
CDNR Committee for the Defence of Native Rights
CIS Commonwealth Investigation Service
CPA Communist Party of Australia
FCAATSI Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders
FMWU Federated Miscellaneous Workers’ Union
ABBREVIATIONS

ILO International Labour Organization
MHR Member of the House of Representatives
MLA Member of the Legislative Assembly
NAWU North Australian Workers’ Union
NTCAR Northern Territory Council for Aboriginal Rights
T&LC Trades and Labor Council
UDHR Universal Declaration of Human Rights
UN United Nations
WILPF Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom
WRE Weapons Research Establishment
WWF Waterside Workers’ Federation
Introduction

Between the end of World War II and the early 1970s, two emergent and distinct movements coincided as white activists fought important campaigns for Aboriginal rights. This book presents an account of that activism. Radical involvement is examined in a trilogy of case studies about significant campaigns in the Pilbara, Central Australia and the Northern Territory.

The period under scrutiny was quite exceptional in terms of Aboriginal rights advancement and radical left-wing popularity. Communist Party membership was at its highest in Australia during the 1940s and the (often communist-controlled) union movement was extremely powerful. Communists and unionists rallied to support Aboriginal people living in remote Australian regions. Stirred passions and interests inspired these ‘different white people’ (often from eastern seaboard cities) to action. Left-wing activists became significant contributors to the Aboriginal
rights movement, supporting tribal or semi-tribal peoples with lifestyles far removed from the experience of their predominantly urban-dwelling memberships.

It is important to bear in mind that this period was also one of dramatic international advancement for human rights. As the world community recovered from World War II, emergent powers were keen to establish a new global order. Establishment of the United Nations (UN) epitomised this desire to eliminate possibilities of wars between countries, and to create a platform for dialogue between member states. The pursuit of human rights led to creation of general documents, particularly the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). With graphic understanding of the Holocaust came total discrediting of any racial thinking at UN level and thus, absolute rejection of racism. It was also at this pivotal time that the process of decolonisation accelerated at remarkable speed, as numerous countries (for example, India, Ceylon and the Philippines) gained their independence from colonial rule. International policies needed to accommodate this changing environment, and the rights of indigenous populations became a matter of global importance.

This book evolved over a period of six years. My original idea – to write a story of union activism for Aboriginal rights – was sparked in 2008 while writing an honours thesis. Research on that project about white Australian musicians supporting Aboriginal rights uncovered occasional references to left-wing supporters of rights campaigns. One particularly interesting source I located was a little book published by a formidable union. The *Builders’ Labourers’ Song Book* presented fascinating musical depictions of victory over oppression in Australia. Lyrics celebrated bush struggles, Eureka miners, worker rebellions and Aboriginal rights campaigns. I found a passionate musical call for Gurindji land rights in the Northern Territory intriguing: why were these
union members in south eastern Australia so committed to the rights of Aboriginal people in the far north? And how did they know so much about their plight?

As I now know, unions were deeply involved with Gurindji workers and their families from the day they walked away from Wave Hill cattle station in 1966 (indeed, well before that event). Their long-running commitment was significant. It is not surprising that my new knowledge about worker organisations supporting Aboriginal rights culminated with a decision to focus my doctoral thesis on this topic. It made sense that I should write about something I understood, and past experience working for a union bolstered my confidence to break down the jargon and delineate the policies. This is not to say that the study was a union history, nor was it a labour history. My research focus was upon left-wing contributions to Aboriginal rights campaigns.

This book is drawn in large part from that PhD thesis. And like that earlier work, in this account the actions of left-wing participants are contextualised within broader activist movements and changing political environments. One thing I had not anticipated at the outset of my doctoral study was the prominent role that communists would play in the narrative. My original (albeit naive) intention had been to simply investigate how union members supported Aboriginal peoples in their struggles for rights and land. The unexpected prominence of communists in the activism often occurred due to their close involvement and affiliation with the unions I had originally intended to study. Thus, Australian communists were soon to assume a substantial role in the narrative I was slowly piecing together.

I decided to concentrate on three Aboriginal rights campaigns in remote regional Australia, with overlapping timeframes. In this way, the nuanced study became longitudinal. My narrative begins in Western Australia in 1946. It then progresses through the 1940s and 1950s in Central Australia, and then into the 1960s and 1970s
in the Northern Territory. Whilst left-wing activism during the postwar period had appeared within wider discussions about Aboriginal rights, in-depth study about the topic at hand was lacking. In my PhD thesis (and now this book), contributions of left-wing activists are the primary focus. This strategy promotes thorough investigation of left-wing activism during three campaigns and prominently highlights these important and positive examples of the support of these ‘different white people’ for Aboriginal rights.

Using a broad-based approach, I have been able to examine a raft of social, political, economic and industrial issues within each campaign. This means that my narrative has become much more than a political or social history. The activists are the central characters. Investigation of their activism has allowed a much better understanding of the campaigns themselves (and this point is particularly relevant with regard to the effects of the weapons testing programs on desert Aboriginal peoples). In this way, aspects of Aboriginal rights campaigns assume far greater complexity.

The writing of Aboriginal history has changed significantly over past decades. I believe that this book is a modern interpretation of extremely important contributions to the Aboriginal rights movement. It is crafted as an engaging analysis of change during a pivotal period of transition. The three case studies identify strong linkages and support networks involving not only the marginal left-wing activists but also numerous moderate groups, and even extremely conservative bodies. These often incongruous affiliations produced three formidable campaigns for Aboriginal rights, and the important roles of unionists and communists within this wider movement are closely scrutinised. Those associations between radical activists and others are explored as the Aboriginal rights movement moved towards a model of self-determination.

There are ten chapters. Chapter One contextualises material that follows in the three case studies. An overview of humanitarianism
during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is presented, pertaining particularly to Aboriginal rights. Changing national and international attitudes to indigenous and broader human rights are outlined, followed by an introductory discussion of union involvement with Aboriginal rights. The chapter concludes with description of communist attitudes and policies regarding indigenous rights, at local and international levels.

Chapters Two and Three deal with the Pilbara walk-offs. Of these, the first describes Western Australia’s historical responses to Aboriginal rights and pastoral industry conditions in the Pilbara region. A key left-wing supporter of the movement is introduced, and with the start of the walk-offs comes particular emphasis upon communist press coverage. Chapter Three provides detailed analysis of the contributions by left-wing activists over the first three years of the Pilbara campaign.

Chapter Four introduces the case study examining the weapons testing programs in Central Australia, along with comprehensive description of the background and establishment of the tests. The issues surrounding the dangers to desert Aboriginal peoples are outlined. Left-wing activists who took up this cause are introduced and contextualised within the wider protest movement. Attention then moves to a discussion about the nuclear tests, focusing upon their impacts upon nomadic peoples who were inconveniently in the way. Chapter Five explores left-wing responses to the establishment and conduct of weapons testing in Central Australia. Several representations of artistic protest by communists vividly display contemporary views. Radical activism is also discussed within the wider peace movement, with numerous examples of this activism examined. In Chapter Six, activism during the nuclear testing program is explored. Communist activities are prominent and this section also includes a discussion about communist front organisations. Also included is discussion about protests against the establishment of a controversial weather
station and an analysis of left-wing reaction to a startling government report and associated film exposing the shocking situation for desert Aboriginal people living within the testing zone.

The final four chapters concern what is commonly known as the ‘Gurindji walk-off’ in the Northern Territory. Chapter Seven presents the background to this dispute, including industrial actions attempted by Aboriginal pastoral workers over previous decades. The walk-off is contextualised within the evolving national Aboriginal rights movement and broader international developments. The important precursor Award case which sparked the unrest is also examined. In Chapter Eight, focus turns to events as the Gurindji walk-off campaign commences and its support network establishes. Left-wing press coverage of events is conspicuous as the industrial campaign erupts into a struggle over land. In Chapter Nine, the nature of the campaign and its ultimate objectives are the focus. Left-wing support for the walk-off across the country is highlighted. The actions are contextualised alongside wider rights campaigns and governmental responses, before a number of prominent participants in the activism are closely scrutinised in Chapter Ten.

In the following chapter, discussion begins with a historical overview. This includes an introduction to Australia’s Aboriginal rights movement, the unions relevant to this study, the Communist Party, and other pertinent national and international factors in the period leading up to 1946 (when the Pilbara walk-off commences).
Chapter One

Background
When land inhabited by indigenous peoples is colonised by others, monumental and irreversible change happens. From 1788, many groups of nomadic hunter-gatherer peoples living across the Australian continent were brutally confronted when uninvited European visitors assumed permanent residence. Anthropologist Hugh Brody described this process as prosecuted by ‘white men with many powers and purposes’. The newcomers’ pervading notion was that unevolved natives should be civilised and controlled. So, with colonialism came conflict, then social and economic interdependence, as indigenous peoples necessarily adapted to new ways. This drastic cultural shock permeated hunter-gatherer societies across the globe where ancient cultural norms promoting egalitarianism, mutual respect, sharing and ecological responsibility had guided societies for many thousands of
years. Sophisticated languages and music communicating complex indigenous laws (governing moral obligations and responsibilities of territory) were replaced by the rigours of British law. These new European ways were perceived as alien and bizarre. 

Aboriginal peoples on the Australian continent tried, and failed, to recover the territory that Britain claimed. Traditional hunter-gather lifestyles and rituals, medicines, ceremonies and Dreamings were largely wiped out by advancing white settlers with guns, fences and profit margins. Any ethical duty of care binding a colonising country was conveniently disregarded as British, then Australian, governments appropriated lands and relocated peoples. The nature, extent and duration of conflict varied across regions and tribal areas. Common triggers were disputes over land, water and women; and exacerbated by the mutual non-knowing or understanding of the other’s culture.

**Humanitarianism in the nineteenth century**

Not all Australian colonial residents embraced the extreme consequences of invasion. Evidence of early humanitarian concern for dispossessed Aboriginal people has been identified by numerous scholars. For example, Brian Plomley comprehensively researched colonial missionary and administrator George Augustus Robinson’s activities. He transcribed and then published Robinson’s descriptions of the ‘humane’ removal and resettlement of Aboriginal peoples from Van Diemen’s Land to Flinders Island between 1829 and 1834. Plomley also examined benevolent and compassionate actions towards Aboriginal peoples by explorer Jorgen Jorgensen in that colony at around the same time. In a broader example, Henry Reynolds examined the activities of colonial humanitarians actively supporting Aboriginal rights in *This Whis- pering In Our Hearts*. At a time when colonial Australia was so rapidly and profitably overwhelming Aboriginal peoples and lands,
the actions of these benevolent Europeans deserve a closer look. What influenced the actions of these humanitarians? And why were these colonial residents willing to assist Aboriginal people so recently dispossessed by their own powerful new society?

To address these questions, a brief examination of what was influencing colonial Australian thinking is timely. Attitudes to the continent’s original inhabitants were affected by a variety of global ideas and events, and it is important to contextualise ethical conundrums and this rise in humanitarianism accordingly. Indeed, this flow of ‘trans-national’ knowledge heavily influenced Australia’s colonial racial thinking and legislative controls over non-white people.5

Relationships between Aboriginal peoples and Europeans evolved at a time when religion and Social Darwinism competed for popular belief and endorsement. Contemporary Christian thought buoyed humanitarian beliefs that all people were created by God (in his image) and that their souls were immortal. Aboriginal people needed saving. Monogenesists employed religion to battle the tenets of scientific racism which were sometimes used by administrators to justify injustice perpetrated upon indigenous peoples with little or no agency. Indeed, racism had become the rationale for many colonists to justify suppressing the natives’ resistance. Australia’s colonial mentality often reflected how slave-centric West Indies and southern American states viewed black people. That is, as a different race, Aboriginal peoples needed different treatment and management. Some Europeans became deeply influenced by what they witnessed on the frontier that was affecting peoples they were beginning to know and understand. Their strange cultures were becoming better understood and appreciated. In this way, perceived injustices and violence became catalysts for European support by a small but vocal group for the rights of those whose lifestyles and cultures were so manifestly different.6
Colonial thinking was built upon accepted philosophical positions of many theorists, and two are particularly pertinent here. Two centuries earlier, John Locke had devised a framework justifying property ownership. One famous premise identified that once a man worked the soil the land was his, and this philosophy continued to underpin British laws of property ownership or right. This naturally denied ownership rights for Aboriginal hunter-gatherers, as their culture did not incorporate agricultural practices combining labour and land. One particular argument by Jean-Jacques Rousseau complemented Locke’s theory. He held that primitive native peoples would be swept along a path of civilisation as civil societies evolved. Moral codes and laws would then be instituted as a social contract to administer property accumulation and division of labour. Colonial thinking incorporated both of these theories to help justify land acquisition and natural dominance over indigenous peoples.

Underlying British procurement of any lands from indigenous peoples was the idea of *terra nullius*. This doctrine decreed that as Aboriginal people merely wandered over the land rather than resided in a manner that British society understood, that formal occupancy and ownership of the Australian continent was up for grabs. And grab they did, justifying their actions with a powerful combination of English and international laws. At the same time, the British claimed to have acquired sovereignty, and the relationship assumed traditional form as the omnipotent Crown ruled white and black subjects.

Some colonists began questioning the ethical underpinnings of a society which (so abruptly) displaced indigenous peoples from their lands. Previously accepted philosophical theories were failing to justify unfolding events. Growing social consciousness suggested that dispossession of indigenous lands inferred moral obligation to safeguard the welfare of the dispossessed and compensate for appropriated lands. A British House of Commons
Select Committee investigated the rights of indigenous peoples in colonised countries in 1837. Repercussions of the British Anti-Slavery Society's hard-won successes were filtering through colonies, and attitudes were changing. In 1833 slavery throughout the British Empire and its colonies was finally abolished, in what Reynolds identified as ‘one of the most popular [humanitarian] crusades of the 19th century’. Anti-slavery crusaders then channelled their considerable energies and attention towards the rights of indigenous peoples around the globe. Australia’s ‘first land rights movement’ evolved during the 1830s when British and colonial advocates lobbied for Aboriginal claims to land, culminating with formation of the British and Foreign Aborigines Protection Society. Contrasts between the cruelties of slavery and those perpetuated as a result of colonisation fuelled heated and emotional debates in Britain and Australia.7

Benevolent Christian beliefs about racial equality drove a wave of missionaries across the globe to locate, and then save, colonised indigenous peoples. Aboriginal protectors were increasingly appointed to safeguard rights and provide protection from white abuse. But battling the benevolent Christians and humanitarian British reformers were scientists driving racial treatment of indigenous peoples, based on the tenet that white and black were unique and separate species. Phrenologists measured skulls, extrapolating from these anatomical findings to declare that difference in shapes and sizes of heads meant reduced intellectual capacity in black people. From the late 1800s a powerful new scientific approach to race known as eugenics emerged, along with concomitant beliefs of racial superiority and even more dangerous ideals of preserving racial purities. Coupled with this was an almost obsessive fear of colour, and a need to protect white Australia by limiting the rights and numbers of anyone coloured differently.8
Moving into the 1900s

Enthusiastic humanitarianism of the early nineteenth century waned. From around 1860 until the 1920s most Europeans chose to look the other way, and the Aboriginal plight was overwhelmingly ignored. A defensive mindset reinforced the concept that Australia was a ‘white man’s country’, weighed down by the incapability of black men. Social Darwinism provided a moral ideological platform for progress and prosperity, endorsing mentalities of other colonised nations dealing with their own questions of what to do with their indigenous populations. In short, Darwinians believed that Aboriginal peoples would eventually die out, as the evolutionary process positioned the fitter white race as survivors. People of mixed descent had been herded onto reserves, in colonial responses to dilemmas about what to do with the large ‘half-caste’ populations depending upon white authorities for welfare services and protection.9

With Federation in 1901 came an immediate racial declaration, as the major political parties united to support and create a ‘White Australia’ policy. ‘White Australia’ legislation drew a ‘colour line’ around the country, in a loud announcement that ‘whiteness’ epitomised national identity. Australia’s architects of federation drew upon trans-national ideas (particularly from the United States) to design laws that would keep their country as white as possible. The collective power of the Immigration Restriction Act 1901 and Pacific Islander Labourers Act 1901 was immense. Non-white workers were expelled, as Australia rushed to preserve and protect the nation’s racial integrity. Whilst support for this legislative protection of the white race was widely applauded, other people representing a broad cross-section of the community did oppose it. They included left- and right-wing activists, church congregations, and most understandably, immigrants and international workers.10

In Australia, supportive organisations such as the Aborigines’ Protection League and Victorian Aboriginal Group began to
appear. Members of these groups were white. Importantly, activist organisations driven by Aboriginal people were also established at this time, and the Australian Aboriginal Progressive Association was a trailblazer for the indigenous political rights movement during the 1920s. The Australian Aborigines’ League, led by activist William Cooper, and the NSW Aborigines Progressive Association also became prominent among Aboriginal-run organisations. This energetic Aboriginal activism was famously punctuated by the sad proclamation of Australia’s national ‘Day of Mourning’ on 26 January 1938, while most white Australians were out and about celebrating the 150th anniversary of invasion.11

Knowledge of Aboriginal peoples grew as anthropological investigations revealed societies rich with intricate cultures and deep understanding about land and relationships to it. Australian studies received formal recognition with the establishment of the first Chair of Anthropology at Sydney University in 1925. This appointment of A. R. Radcliffe-Brown was prompted, in large part, by Australia’s ‘acquisition’ of New Guinea following World War I. The peoples of Australian-administered Papua and New Guinea were considered far more bound by cultural traditions than Australia’s culture-contacted mainland indigenous population, hence the creation of this new anthropological opportunity to study groups perceived to be less impacted by Western civilisation.12

In 1933, A. P. Elkin became the new Chair of Anthropology (a position he held for nearly twenty-four years). Anthropologists Ronald and Catherine Berndt described this as a halcyon period when ‘field research flourished’.13 This enthusiastic drive for anthropological knowledge was, however, a double-edged sword at a time when eugenicists worried about racial mixture and its potentially unfortunate results. Donald Thomson was one anthropologist who did not embrace this element of scientific thought. His writings about Arnhem Land reflected deep
respect and friendship with people with whom he lived and photographed during the 1930s and 1940s. Thomson learnt customs, language and hunting skills, as local people welcomed him into their country. He actively advocated Aboriginal messages and needs to governments and universities, and his valiant attempts to oppose the weapons tests during the 1940s and 1950s are noted in later chapters.

Scientific exploration of Aboriginal culture was matched by growing artistic interest. Writers, actors, musicians and artists created conduits for Aboriginal stories into mainstream Australia by weaving people, places and cultural practices into their work. The Jindyworobak movement exemplified these connections to Aboriginal culture by white writers and poets. This group formed during the late 1930s, its name coined from an Aboriginal word meaning to join or annex. Powerful literary pieces publicised and vindicated Aboriginal connections with their land. Jindyworobakism matched musical output between 1940 and 1960, as both artistic genres reflected the white Australian need to embrace and understand Aboriginal culture.

League of Nations and the International Labour Organization

Australia was a foundation member of the League of Nations, which was established at the 1919 Paris Peace Conference. This intergovernmental body formed part of a broader strategy to create a peaceful world community and avoid another brutal world war. Of relevance here, the League introduced a notion of sacred trusteeship, whereby civilised countries assumed control and protection over uncivilised societies. As a consequence, at the conclusion of World War I, Australia became the mandated administrator and ‘protector of natives’ of New Guinea, reporting its activities to the League.
A controversial race card was played early by a prominent League member country. In 1919 Japan’s attempt to incorporate a racial equality provision into the preamble of the League’s Covenant was defeated, meaning that some member nations of the new global affiliation immediately became more equal than others. This result also epitomised more broadly the perceptions of fear towards non-white races by Australia, Britain and the USA at that time. Japan’s suggestion was debated at length. The USA (which never joined the League) was influential in discussions. It feared that racial equality threatened US ability to legislate in its own interests: the yellow and black folk were just fine when controllable by discriminatory laws. Britain also discounted this idea of racial equality as unrealistic thinking, as blacks would never be the equals of whites. The British Empire position was, of course, highly influenced by member countries such as Australia and South Africa (which were dealing with their own racial problems). Australia’s view was uncompromising. Prime Minister Hughes flatly opposed any statement of racial equality in the Covenant compromising his country’s tight rein on its non-white people and demographic composition. Hughes’ influence on the British position was significant. When that country voiced opposition to the Japanese racial equality clause, the initiative immediately negated as a unanimous vote in favour became unachievable.16

To address a wide range of international problems, the League established agencies to tackle matters such as disarmament, health, justice, slavery and refugees. One such agency aimed to improve conditions for workers by setting international labour standards. International Labour Organization (ILO) membership included delegates from the League’s member countries, plus representatives of employer and employee organisations. In 1930 the ILO formulated the important Forced Labour Convention (aimed at suppressing the use of compulsory labour by involuntary workers).
During the latter half of that decade, several other conventions specifically addressed recruitment, contract and employment conditions of indigenous workers.¹⁷

**Unions and Aboriginal workers**

Union attitudes regarding Aboriginal workers varied during the first half of the twentieth century. Examples pertaining to two unions with large pastoral worker memberships illustrate that diversity of thought. When the North Australian Workers’ Union (NAWU) formed in 1926, it denied membership to all ‘coloured’ workers, except those people who were Maori, ‘American Negroes’ or who had a European parent. Thus, people deemed ‘full-blood’ Aboriginal were prohibited. Communists called (to no avail) for the NAWU to protect exploited Aboriginal workers and abolish racial barriers.¹⁸

The Australian Workers’ Union (AWU) held a different position. In 1927 its rules changed, allowing Aboriginal people and the ‘offspring’ of marriage between people of Aboriginal and European descent to become members. AWU support of Award wages and conditions for Aboriginal workers was, however, often compromised by the need to represent the majority of their membership (the white workers), whose demand in pastoral settings may have been diminished by the availability of a cheap Aboriginal workforce if Award provisions were equal. Societal views inhibited struggles for Award inclusion. Common among these were beliefs that Aboriginal culture clashed with European productivity requirements within employment settings, and that Aboriginal workers were simply unable to work at the rate and quality of white workers.¹⁹

Growing union interest in the rights of Aboriginal people was evidenced in the publication of an influential pamphlet. *New Deal for the Aborigines* was written by the federal president of
the Sheet Metal Workers’ Union in 1939. Tom Wright, leader of the union, was also vice-president of the NSW Trades and Labor Council (T&LC) and importantly, it was this body which endorsed publication of the comprehensive thirty-two-page booklet. Wright had worked in the bush, and his views about Aboriginal rights were influenced through correspondence with anthropologist Olive Pink. New Deal for the Aborigines was widely circulated and some of its recommendations about ‘full-blooded Aborigines’ were endorsed at the All-Australian Congress of Trade Unions in 1940. Wright (also a communist) demanded that tribes with more than twenty-five members be granted an ‘inviolable reserve’, with full rights to minerals, water and timber. He believed that this would ensure survival of Australia’s ‘contented and prosperous Aboriginal native people’. Wright also endorsed the anthropological findings of Donald Thomson, who had been commissioned by the Commonwealth Government during the late 1930s to survey Aboriginal people in Arnhem Land. Several of Thomson’s recommendations were included in Wright’s New Deal, including a proposal for ‘special courts’ to deal with ‘native offences’, the abolition of police constables acting in dual roles as ‘protectors’, and establishment of a Native Affairs department.

Relationships between unions and the Communist Party were to seesaw from the 1920s until the 1970s. Antagonisms between some unions and the Party were often evident, with the AWU (closely aligned to the Labor Party) a particularly ardent opponent during the early Cold War period. Its hostility also extended to the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU), which AWU officials viewed as communist-controlled during the late 1940s and early 1950s. But in a positive example of collaboration, Queensland’s Aboriginal workers were staunchly supported by communists and more militant unions during the 1950s. Workers (particularly in northern Queensland) became politically aware, as regular influxes of southern workers with ‘sophisticated’
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communist and unionist knowledge boosted strong union membership and industrial power. But regional differences were also evident. Northern Australian unionists markedly shifted their position, from connection with international communist policies, to localised motivation by members to help Aboriginal people they had personal relationships with and were committed to help. In this example, racism was lessening as the needs of Aboriginal people were increasingly included in NAWU policies, and they consequently earned greater respect as good workers and community members.

Communism and Aboriginal rights

Australian communists wasted no time in establishing a firm position of support for Aboriginal rights that was never to waver. When Australia’s Communist Party was established in 1920, its members connected to global politics in a new and exciting way. This marked their important break with colonial ‘linkages’ to a more mature relationship with the outside world. Australian communists were influenced by knowledge that fellow socialists around the world were organising to protect their civil and political rights. The Party presented opportunities to engage with diverse issues such as Aboriginal and women’s rights. Communists attended study classes and groups, wrote literature, created art, and presented struggles in dramatic and musical form. In this way, communism offered worldly sophistication to this newly organised group of activists seeking to overthrow the oppression inflicted by capitalist society.

As membership numbers grew, support intensified. There were as few as 300 members in 1928, but with the looming Depression and militant opposition to threatened industrial rights came a sharp increase in sign-ups. Workers identified the potential of this radical new political party. Disillusioned unionists turned to the
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Communist Party for industrial and political protection against the oppressive capitalist class. Membership grew from nearly 500 in 1930 to over 2,000 by the end of 1931, as communism attracted a large number of unemployed men. The Party also widened its interests, establishing an agrarian section in 1930 to capture imaginations in the bush. In a pivotal move, a communist was elected as leader of the powerful Miners’ Federation in 1934. Comrades then moved into positions of power in the Railways’ Union too, as the labour movement attempted to counteract inroads that European fascism might make into Australia.28

Party numbers increased to nearly 3,000 by the end of 1935 (including growing female and rural membership). Communist influence in unions also advanced, with members assuming leadership positions in the Federated Ironworkers’ Association, and Sheet Metal Workers’, Waterside Workers’ and Seamen’s unions. Communists developed less aggressive (and more planned) strategies. They used the arbitration system to their advantage, improved their public relations with lots of membership meetings, effectively publicised their campaigns, and utilised mainstream media to good effect. By the end of the decade, members totalled 4,500.29

In 1921, the Australian Communist Party had been admitted to the Moscow-based ‘Third Internationale’ (known also as the Comintern, or Communist International). But, although Australian communists toed the international Party line, they also brought to the table very distinctive local idiosyncrasies and vivid recent local experiences of industrial upheaval.30 Member organisations adhered to twenty-one conditions of this peak international body, and Condition Eight is particularly pertinent here: it demanded support by communist parties worldwide for ‘emancipation in the colonies’ of their ‘oppressed nationalities’.31

Australian communists also embraced Soviet ‘national minorities’ policies. The Soviet position on indigenous rights was framed within strategies developed by Joseph Stalin during the 1920s and
1930s to accommodate the needs of national minorities. In 1921 Stalin announced that responses to the ‘national question’ would protect these groups, while liberating colonial peoples from imperialist oppression. He believed that this strategy broke down ‘the wall between whites and blacks’. In his 1924 *The National Question* lecture, Stalin expressed appreciation for Vladimir Lenin’s contribution to solving the national problem. He believed in Lenin’s view that ‘oppressed peoples’ in all colonies should achieve self-determination and secede into independent states. According to Stalin, revolution held the key and ‘dominant’ nations needed to support this end.

Australia’s Communist Party published its first national newspaper commentary about Aboriginal rights in a succinct and powerfully written front-page article on 26 January 1923. On this poignant anniversary of British colonisation, readers learned dark communist truths about Aboriginal workers in the Northern Territory. These pastoral ‘slaves’ performed their duties under duress, were not paid, lived in shocking conditions, and were not allowed to leave. Communist newspapers continued to publish numerous articles highlighting oppression, police brutality and pastoral worker treatment throughout the 1920s. They also called for trade unions to actively support Aboriginal worker rights.

An important front-page article appeared in *Workers’ Weekly* in 1928. Stark repercussions of colonisation were depicted in vivid communist prose. The following excerpts demonstrate the emotionally driven power of the words:

> The annals of Australian pioneering history are smudged with the blood of natives, slaughtered, not because they resisted the white intruder, but mainly because they were in the way of the big squatter, and when forced under economic pressure to spear a sheep or bullock, were invariably rounded up and a few shot to show the rest that the white man’s property must be respected…
...the bleached bones of hundreds of natives bear testimony to the ruthlessness of “our brave pioneers” against a people whose only crime was to take back what had been taken from them.

And only last week...seventeen natives in the Northern Territory were shot down in cold blood by the police – old men, women and children...forced to come to a certain watering place on account of the dry season and because the squatter’s cattle watered there, the natives had to be shot out of the way.36

Legacies of colonisation were also addressed at a global level. In 1927 a Pan-Pacific regional group of the Comintern was established. This network was a 'space to openly contest the racism and chauvinism of Australia’s history of settlement', with communists 'the first transnational activists to see colonialism as a necessarily racist and destructive experience for indigenous people'.37

Communist focus upon Aboriginal rights was maintained during the early 1930s. This ardent approach is somewhat surprising. The country was floundering within the Great Depression and social issues surrounding high unemployment and decreased real wages impacted severely upon most Australians. But (as identified above), Party membership figures indicate that few people were clearly doing a lot of work.

A comprehensive Draft Policy of Struggle Against Slavery was released by the Australian Party in 1931. From that time onwards, communist writings in their Australian newspapers and policy documents almost always capitalised ‘Aborigines’. This demonstrated respectful acknowledgement of Aboriginal peoples as members of a valid discrete nationality or broad cultural group. The Draft Policy demanded full economic, political and social rights for Aboriginal people. A lengthy preamble damned the ‘inhuman exploitation’ and ‘campaign of mass physical extermination...the
murder drive’. Communists exposed colonial legacies as cold, hard facts:

Such gentle British colonising devices as “Abo shooting hunts”, poisoning of the only water holes in the desert country, cyanide in the meat, and strychnine in the flour, police shooting parties, burning the bush over their heads, segregating sexes, kidnapping the children – particularly females – and putting them to work hundreds of miles away from their race and parents, killing off the game...thus starving them to death, arresting without any warrant or for that matter, any cause whatever, the most virile men in the tribes (after killing off the aged and infirm) and forcing the arrested to work with chains around their necks on Government roads and for station owners, issuing licences to any capitalist desiring to employ “unlimited numbers of natives without pay for an indefinite period”, setting up organisations of crawlers and kidnappers, known as “Aborigines Protection Boards” to enslave the remaining members of the tribes, and “Mission Stations”, under dope-peddlers to muster the youth so that they can be sold into slavery – such truly British methods were used, and are still being used to enslave the Australian Aborigines and to totally exterminate the races so that the crimes of British and Australian imperialists may be covered up.38

Communists were passionately conveying their truths about Aboriginal Australia. They wanted the world to know. Raw writing style matched brutal content. The 1931 policy presented fourteen innovative demands for Aboriginal rights. These included: the right to property, education, employment opportunity, cultural protection, industrial equity, equality before the law, women’s and children’s rights and safety, abolition of all missions and Aboriginal
Protection Boards, and ‘absolute political freedom’ (including full citizenship). Yet again, union campaign support was urged to ‘win back…part of their native country and common rights as human beings’. The final demand was radically innovative:

The handing over…of large tracts of watered and fertile country, with towns, seaports, railways, roads, etc., to become one or more independent aboriginal [sic] states or republics. The handing back…of all Central, Northern, and North West Australia to enable [Aborigines] to develop their native pursuits. These aboriginal [sic] republics to be independent of Australian and other foreign powers. To have the right to make treaties with foreign powers, including Australia, establish their own army, governments, industries, and in every way be independent of imperialism.39

These demands exemplify the aggressive communist approach to Aboriginal rights. This policy was no lukewarm lip-service response to Stalin’s national question. Australian communists called upon ‘workers, intellectuals, humanitarians, scientists [and] anti-imperialists’ to join this vigorous campaign.40 Party support for Aboriginal rights demonstrated enormous commitment and solidarity.

Australian communists placed great credence on what they believed to be happening in the Soviet Union. A 1932 Workers’ Weekly article slammed the scientific approach to race prevalent at that time, and praised the Soviet Union as a state ‘where ALL races and people have economic and social equality and all “national” states within the Union have complete control of their own affairs’.41 Australian communists were urged to believe that Soviet treatment of its national minorities (such as Jewish or Roma peoples) and indigenous peoples (including numerous Siberian ethnic and language groups and Arctic Sami peoples) exemplified how Australia should frame its policies for indigenous peoples. Workers’ Weekly
reported Soviet indigenous workers ‘being given control of the land for cultivation...equal status with all other sections of the population’. It identified ‘no punitive expeditions to drive them from the land, no wholesale slaughter, no social injustices; but the opportunity to develop themselves, encouragement and assistance to work out their own destiny’. The Soviet Union sounded utopic, and Australia’s humanitarian comrades were probably impressed.

In a blatant propaganda exercise, *Workers’ Weekly* contrasted the Soviet treatment of Roma people with Australia’s abuses of Aboriginal people:

In Moscow alone there are five cooperative gipsy [sic] artels [worker groups operating as cooperatives] for the manufacture of foodstuffs, metal containers and chemicals. Many gipsies [sic] are now working in the giant undertakings of Socialist construction, in collective farms, as school teachers, as singers, in the opera houses, as engineers and architects. In fact, every avenue before open only to the dominant Russians is now open to the gipsies [sic] – and they are hastening along those avenues with the energy and enthusiasm of greyhounds long held in leash.

The article predicted communist elimination of the imperialist and capitalist invention of racial superiority, and replacement by cultural equality and opportunity. Four years later, *Workers’ Weekly* revealed the Soviet recipe that Australia could duplicate: ‘The Soviet government has solved all the problems of the minority peoples by its policy of providing them with financial, technical, educational and economic assistance’.

What was really happening in the Soviet Union was unthinkable for most Australian communists. Stalin’s purges began in
1934, with his attempts to purify Party and State. Soviet officials questioning or opposing Stalinism were removed with progressively more gusto as Stalin’s power soared. The period from 1934 involved ‘systematic terrorizing…no one was safe; everyone was suspect…Arbitrary arrest and summary execution became the norm…Stalin had become the Party’. Stalin’s national minority sentiments were later found to be subterfuge. His contempt for Soviet peoples such as Ukrainians, Muslims, Jews and Georgians (of whom he was one) was eventually revealed. But as far as most Australian communists were concerned, Stalin’s policies were as ethical as the high moral code they believed him to possess.

As we now know, such idealism disguised little actual knowledge. But, as brief examples illustrate here, two prominent Australians were acutely aware of what was actually going on. Communist poet Dorothy Hewett visited the Soviet Union in 1952. Sixteen years later, she reflected upon that trip in *The Hidden Journey*. Her poem included images of starvation, devastation and ‘paper faces’ of political prisoners seen through ‘blinders on her eyes’ and creeping doubts. She contrasted ‘commissars [pulling] pale fur coats to their ears’ with ‘ragged’ children begging and a Siberian man half-naked in the sleet. Doors were banged late in the night, microphones were hidden, and people unexplainably disappeared. Hewett walked through streets hearing ‘marvellous lies’. In her poem, hindsight was no excuse:

*We are all guilty, ignorance was as inexcusable
As the blissful cataracts that closed on our white eyes*

Another Australian communist visited the Soviet Union in 1951. And like Hewett, writer Frank Hardy harboured silent (but grave) concerns about the implementation of communism there. Hardy later wrote of his trip in a cathartic, perhaps purgative, article published in the *Bulletin* and London’s *Sunday Times* during 1968.
A blissful ignorance had prevailed in Australia’s early postwar years as communists worked for ‘peaceful transition’ to the ‘ordered and just society’ supposedly operating in the Soviet Union. Comrades Hewett and Hardy apparently knew otherwise at that time, but had chosen not to disclose. Hardy wrote of his 1951 Moscow trip, ‘I saw what I wanted to see’. He described his writings at that time as disguising his disillusionment, and born of his loyal idealism within ‘the web of Stalinism’.

Truths of Stalinist Soviet policy and activity were officially exposed by Soviet First Secretary Nikita Khrushchev in 1956. Stalin’s reign of terror had ended with his death in 1953. Khrushchev had been an ardent and loyal supporter of his predecessor, but in his famous 1956 speech, he dramatically changed tack to denounce Stalin’s policies. Khrushchev not only exposed horrendous tolls of the purges and mass executions, but also attacked Stalin’s foreign policies, strategic incompetence and narcissistic rule by terror. This period also marked the rise of communism in China, as that country and the Soviets vied for acknowledgement as communist world leader.

Australia’s Communist Party post–World War II
Passionate comrades worked tirelessly for the Party and within unions. Communist membership surged from 4,000 in 1940 to its peak of 23,000 in 1944, when radical politics became much more appealing to a wider socio-economic base, including intellectuals. But by 1952, this number dropped dramatically to 6,000. Several factors influenced this sharp decline. In 1949 Party leader Lance Sharkey was jailed for uttering and publishing seditious comments. A campaign of fear ensued, with more arrests for dubious offences.
Members left in droves. Decreasing numbers occurred due to damage inflicted by the Cold War, ongoing revelations about the Soviet Union, and the rise of anti-communist organisations. B. A. (Bob) Santamaria’s ‘Catholic Social Studies Movement’ is a notable example of such a fear campaign. It aimed to protect unions and the Labor Party from communist influence and control. This group received financial backing from the powerful Catholic Church, following Santamaria’s negotiations with Victoria’s influential Archbishop Mannix.52

A powerful anti-communist party also emerged. In a bitter 1955 factional split, a Catholic Action splinter group broke away from the Labor Party to form the Democratic Labor Party (DLP). This Party intended to wipe out communist influence in unions and the Australian Labor Party (ALP), and DLP preferences enabled conservative governments to maintain power until 1972. Cold War fears of communism were palpable. In 1950 conservative commentator Norman Cowper warned of ‘key industries’ vulnerable to ‘sabotage’ by communist-controlled unions.53 Antagonists described communists as ‘human vermin’, ‘ratbags’, ‘poor stooges’ or ‘poisonous’. Indeed, Mannix called them ‘the scourge of Satan’.54

Robert Menzies and his government attempted to ban the Communist Party in 1950 and 1951. The infamous ‘Petrov’ espionage case initiated a fresh smear campaign upon anyone connected with communism. Many members resigned as sectarian debate raged about whether the Party should maintain Soviet line, or operate under a moderate Australian socialistic model based more traditionally within roots of the working-class movement. Following the 1956 Khrushchev speech, a mass-exodus of Party intellectuals occurred. By 1960 the international communist movement split, with loyalties pledged to the Soviet Union or China. Australian communists also divided, as allegiances to Stalinism competed with less tarnished Maoist philosophies. A small group splintered away to form a small version of the Communist
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Party subtitled ‘Marxist-Leninist’, and members embraced writings by Marx, Lenin, Stalin and Mao.55

Global context
Following establishment of the United Nations (superseding the League of Nations), international attention turned to human rights. UN support for decolonisation was declared in its Charter, and countries were moving away from colonial control to self-government and determination. India is a notable example where the rise of nationalism and peaceful resistance culminated with independence in 1947.56 Within this rapidly changing environment of international relations, an important UN declaration presented new challenges for countries with indigenous populations. Australia’s Minister for External Affairs H. V. ‘Doc’ Evatt presided over General Assembly adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) in 1948. Australia and forty-seven other countries unanimously supported it.

But supporting the UDHR and agreeing to work within its guidelines were very different things, and Australia’s contrary position is important to note. The UDHR contained thirty Articles declaring equality of all before the law, freedom of movement within and in/out of countries, the right to marry and own property, voting rights, and equitable pay and employment conditions. In 1949 Australia’s Department of the Interior identified localised problems with at least five of its Articles. It was considered that the Declaration would compromise the way Australia treated Aboriginal people and its power to remove children under the ‘half-caste’ policy. Other government powers under threat were: the ability to restrict movements in the NT, to permit marriages between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal persons, to deny voting rights, and to control the right (at that time banned) of Aboriginal people to work in licensed premises or the mining industry.
Australia’s governing officials hoped the country’s indigenous population would be exempt from UDHR Article powers, as Aboriginal peoples were considered to be uncivilised and unable to protect or provide for themselves. The Australian government position was that its kind and benevolent approach was for the good of people unable to cope with freedoms and potentials embodied within the Declaration.57

Australia’s position was further stated a few years later. At the tenth UN General Assembly in 1955, it announced that two covenants being drafted would not be applied to the Aboriginal population: the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, and on Civil and Political Rights. Australia again argued protective rather than discriminatory motives, with indigenous people requiring guardianship until successfully assimilated into Australia’s mainstream white society.58

Conclusion

By 1946 – as the year when the first case study presented here began – Aboriginal rights in Australia were being considered by political and non-political bodies, both domestically and overseas. Calls by emergent Aboriginal rights support organisations were now powerfully reinforced by key international covenants promoting the rights of indigenous peoples. Australian communists (guided by the Soviet position) already had a strong tradition of supporting Aboriginal rights. Prior to 1946, union support for Aboriginal rights varied, but (as the next two chapters identify) their solidarity for the Pilbara walk-off would manifest as strong and resolute.

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In the following chapter the first of three case studies presented here commences with an overview of the Pilbara walk-offs.