

## 'Their Ultimate Absorption': Assimilation in 1930s Australia

John Chesterman and Heather Douglas

You're like the majority of people in Australia. You hide from this very real and terrifically important thing, and hide it, and come to think after a while that it don't exist. But it does! It does! Why are there twenty thousand half-castes in the country? Why are they never heard of? Oh my God! Do you know that if you dare write a word on the subject to a paper or a magazine you get your work almost chucked back at you?  
(Xavier Herbert, *Capricornia*, 1938)<sup>1</sup>

When Xavier Herbert's *Capricornia* was finally<sup>2</sup> published on Australia Day in 1938 it created instant controversy. It was described variously as 'an Australian masterpiece destined to become a classic',<sup>3</sup> and as 'repetitive and disgusting'.<sup>4</sup> Herbert's description of life in mythical Port Zodiac in Capricornia (a thinly disguised Darwin, Northern Territory)<sup>5</sup> was as frank as it was unsettling for both northern and southern 'white' Australians. The book was published by the Publicist Press, which was run by P R 'Inky' Stephensen, himself a keen advocate of Indigenous rights,<sup>6</sup> and the book attracted criticism for Herbert's advancement of Indigenous causes.

Herbert was well-known around the Northern Territory long before the publication of *Capricornia*. He was appointed as a protector of Aborigines pursuant to the *Aboriginals Ordinance* from 1935; but less than a year later his appointment was terminated by Administrator Abbott, who judged<sup>7</sup> him to lack loyalty and found that Herbert had failed to adhere to certain standards. Herbert's tasks in that role had included appearing in the police courts for Indigenous people and 'half-castes'.<sup>8</sup> One of the central themes in *Capricornia* was Herbert's depiction of Australia's growing number of mixed-race children, whom he understood to be the result invariably of sex between white frontier men and Indigenous women.<sup>9</sup>

This article refers extensively to *Capricornia* for two reasons: firstly, because its text was expressive of growing white consciousness of mixed-race people; and secondly, because the book, through its popularity and its central message, contributed to the pressure on governments for a new policy direction in relation to mixed-race people.

Herbert was one of a growing chorus of novelists who gave a central place in their texts to people of mixed race and questioned the extent to which non-Indigenous society could continue to ignore them. Despite the fact that sex between whites and Indigenous people or 'half-castes' was circumscribed by legal prohibitions in some jurisdictions during the 1930s, the practice was widespread, and children of white-Indigenous unions became a literary topic. Other novelists of the 1930s such as Conrad Sayce<sup>10</sup> and William Hatfield<sup>11</sup> also explored the issue of how to deal with the ever-increasing number of 'half-castes'. Dewar writes that these novelists of the 1930s used their 'half-caste' protagonists to challenge the notion of what it meant to be white or Indigenous.<sup>12</sup> One of the central stories of the narrative

of *Capricornia* is the tale of the 'half-caste' Norman Shillingsworth. Norman had grown up believing that he was the son of a Javanese princess, but on returning to the Northern Territory he is subjected to racism and becomes aware of his Indigenous heritage. Herbert presents the racism directed at Norman and other 'half-castes' as generally 'wilful, stupid and remedial'.<sup>13</sup> Much of the tragedy in the epic tale revolves around the difficulties faced by 'half-castes' living in the Northern Territory. For example, the tragic and confronting fate of the 'half-caste' woman, Tocky, ends the book when she and her baby are found dead, hiding from the police in a water tank.<sup>14</sup>

While Herbert was writing his book, the various Indigenous authorities in the states and the Northern Territory were haphazardly yet uniformly coming to the view that their Indigenous policies were not working. As the book was published, the issue reached a crescendo. *Capricornia* and Herbert's dislike of 1930s policy on Indigenous people were raised a number of times in the federal parliament to support some parliamentarians' own dislike of prevailing policy.<sup>15</sup> In 1938 Holloway, the member for Melbourne Ports, noted that:

We have been tinkering with the half-caste problem, but we have not made any impression on it; it is gaining all the time ... [a new] plan proposed nothing to stop the growth of half-castes or uplift the full-blooded aborigines.<sup>16</sup>

A policy shift seemed to be inevitable. The new approach that was being developed in mainland jurisdictions would come to be known as assimilation, and would prove particularly attractive to policy-makers from the mid 1930s.

### Assimilation

Assimilation was a policy in the ascendancy in Indigenous affairs from the 1930s to the 1960s.<sup>17</sup> The standard definition now of assimilation dates back to the 1963 statement by Aboriginal affairs ministers:

The policy of assimilation means that all Aborigines and part-Aborigines will attain the same manner of living as other Australians and live as members of a single Australian community enjoying the same rights and privileges, accepting the same responsibilities, observing the same customs and influenced by the same beliefs, hopes and loyalties as other Australians.<sup>18</sup>

This seemingly simple statement belies the many assumptions that render 'assimilation' an extremely complex concept to define. As Russell McGregor contends:

'assimilation' had no single meaning. It was a discourse which was informed by a diversity of intellectual currents and which produced significantly divergent visions of the Aboriginal destiny.<sup>19</sup>

One cause for the confusion surrounding 'assimilation' lies in the fact that the term was used in relation to two distinct forms of integration. The first could be called 'biological absorption', or the desired removal of Indigenous physical characteristics. The second can be termed 'social integration', whereby Indigenous cultural or social practices would yield to non-Indigenous social and cultural practices.<sup>20</sup> Some of the authorities on Aboriginal affairs in the states and territories — for example, A O Neville in Western Australia and Cecil Cook in the Northern Territory — were keen advocates of the active 'breeding out' of Aboriginality. Others, most famously the Sydney anthropologist A P Elkin, championed the 'social

integration' version of assimilation. To complicate matters further, some of the experts in the 1930s who did not advocate the active attempt by authorities to 'breed out' Aboriginality were nevertheless of the 'dying race' view, and held that social integration would facilitate the eventual demise of Indigenous peoples. The 'dying race' view was on the wane by the start of the second world war; nonetheless, it further complicates any attempt to give a clear definition of the policy of assimilation.<sup>21</sup>

The issue of coercion is central to some of the confusion surrounding the term 'assimilation'. Modern-day understandings of the policy often focus, with reason, on those coercive practices that saw authorities compel Indigenous people to forego familial, social and cultural practices in order to merge with white society. The most horrendous example of these practices was the forced removal of mixed-race Indigenous children from their parents.<sup>22</sup> But for some people in the 1930s and later, the term 'assimilation' was used less to justify coercive practices and more to indicate a social expectation. For many, the expectation was that the Indigenous population would eventually lose its cultural (and even biological) uniqueness as its members increasingly interacted with white society. Even where coercion was understood to be a part of the policy, there was disagreement over what the coercive practices should entail; experts who used the term to justify coercive practices disagreed over the extent to which 'assimilation' required the severing of cultural connectedness.<sup>23</sup> While even defining assimilation retrospectively is challenging, Indigenous authorities in the 1930s encountered increasing difficulties in enforcing existing policies and practices.

### **Regulating lives before the 1930s**

From the late nineteenth century to the 1930s, the broad policy direction of state and territory governments in 'settled' parts of Australia had been to isolate so-called 'full blood' Indigenous people on reserves. Some of those people labelled 'half-castes' were considered to be 'Aboriginal' and were forced also to reside on reserves, while others were left free of governmental interference.

One practice that all protection schemes in the states and the Northern Territory attempted was to define legally who was 'Aboriginal' and who was not. People of mixed race, people with both Indigenous and non-Indigenous forebears, created administrative difficulties, and administrative regimes resorted to fanciful determinations based on skin colour as an indication of biological descent, as well as social associations in determining just where on this divide people fell.

The process of drawing a line between colonised and coloniser fulfilled both administrative and ideological functions. In administrative terms, the division guided the making of decisions as to who would be subject to the 'protection' legislation in the various jurisdictions. Ideologically, the division between conqueror and conquered evinced the success of the colonisation process.

Uncertainty as to whether an increasingly large group of people were 'coloniser' or 'colonised' undermined this process.<sup>24</sup>

### **Aboriginality**

Victoria became the first jurisdiction to attempt to draw a clear line between those it considered Aboriginal and 'half-castes' with legislation in 1886. The 1886 Act defined as 'aboriginal' the following people: any 'half-caste' over the age of thirty-

four who was 'habitually associating and living with an aboriginal'; any 'female half-caste' who prior to the Act was 'married to an aboriginal' and who continued to live with him; any 'child of an aboriginal' who could not 'earn his or her own living'; and any 'half-caste' who held a licence to live on an Aboriginal reserve. The aim of this identification was to assist in the removal of most 'half-castes' from Aboriginal reserves. To facilitate this transition, the Victorian Board for the Protection of Aborigines was empowered to supply 'half-castes' with rations for three years,<sup>25</sup> clothing for five years, and blankets for seven years.

Some historians have been of the view that Australian attempts to deal with 'the half-caste threat' began in Victoria with the 1886 Act. This legislation has been described as marking the beginning of the 'official panic' about mixed-race people.<sup>26</sup> However, there is evidence to suggest that, rather than being a response to panic, the 1886 Act can be understood as a cost-saving measure. According to Alfred Deakin, then a member of Victoria's legislative assembly, the aim of the 1886 Act was to make 'the half-castes useful members of society, and gradually [relieve] the State of the cost of their maintenance'. The Victorian Board for the Protection of Aborigines, which effectively authored the new legislation, argued that the legislation sought to ensure 'that the process of merging should be completed as soon as possible, after which all responsibility of the Government as regards [the half-castes] would cease — finality being thus attained'.<sup>27</sup> Under the guise of calling them 'free and equal citizens of the colony', financial savings could be made by merging 'half-castes' into the non-Indigenous community, while 'full blood' Indigenous people could be left gradually to dwindle in numbers on reserves. The change also gave Victorian authorities the freedom to split up a politically active group of individuals at one of the reserves.<sup>28</sup>

The commonwealth government, in the year of its creation, was called upon to state where it drew the definitional line that separated Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. In 1901 Alfred Deakin, as the first commonwealth attorney-general, made an administrative ruling that section 127 in the Australian Constitution, which barred the counting of 'aboriginal natives' in the calculation of population statistics, did not refer to 'half-castes'. He wrote that 'I am of opinion that half-castes are not "aboriginal natives" within the meaning of this section, and should be included in reckoning the population'. This ruling was soon followed by the Attorney-General's Department, with the term 'Aboriginal' applying only to 'all persons in whom the aboriginal blood preponderates'.<sup>29</sup> Certain people of mixed race ancestry, those of fifty per cent or more white descent, were to be included in the general population. While in some ways this appears to have been assimilatory in nature, this policy carried with it no broader implications about the extent to which mixed race people would be compelled to mix with non-Indigenous society.

The commonwealth adopted a different approach when it came to administer 'protection' laws in the Northern Territory. Although the commonwealth did not possess any direct power to legislate nationally with regard to Indigenous people until 1967, after 1911 the commonwealth government took over the administration of the Northern Territory from South Australia. It played a similar role in the Northern Territory to that played by state governments in the administration of Indigenous affairs. The commonwealth's first comprehensive piece of protection legislation in the Northern Territory, the *Aboriginals Ordinance 1918*, in general terms treated as Aboriginal those 'half-castes' who associated with Indigenous people.<sup>30</sup> The focus thus was less on 'preponderating blood' and more on social

associations.

Queensland's first piece of protection legislation, the *Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act 1897*, defined the term 'Aboriginal' very broadly. Yet its main aim was to treat as Aboriginal those 'half-castes' who lived with Indigenous people, while it sought to ignore those 'half-castes' who lived away from Indigenous people. In the words of one Queensland politician:

There were two classes of half-castes, those who generally went with the blacks, and those who went with white people, and the provisions of the measure might very well be restricted to those half-castes who would come within the definition of an aboriginal — that was, those who habitually lived or associated with aboriginals.<sup>31</sup>

Likewise, in Western Australia the protection legislation enacted in 1905 classed as Aboriginal: 'a half-caste who lives with an aboriginal as wife or husband'; 'a half-caste who ... habitually lives or associates with aborigines'; and 'half-caste' children under sixteen years old.<sup>32</sup>

Whether people of mixed-race ancestry were determined by authorities to be Aboriginal depended on the rules in place in the particular jurisdiction in which the individual lived, and often ended up being determined according to social practices rather than by reference to 'blood'. The once-imagined racial divide between colonisers and the colonised was increasingly belied by the fact that it was not 'blood' but the company kept that determined whether 'half-castes' would be treated as Aboriginal.

### **The 'half-caste' problems in the 1930s**

By the 1920s all mainland states and the Northern Territory had established Indigenous 'protection' regimes that empowered the removal of Indigenous people to reserves and, once there, regulated their lives.<sup>33</sup> The realisation that Australia was home to an increasing population of mixed race children forced governments and Indigenous administrators to rethink their approaches. Although there is no precise date at which this realisation could be said to have been shared by administrators and policy-makers, the 'tipping point' appears to have occurred around the mid 1930s, the time Herbert was finishing *Capricornia*. This realisation coincided with the growing scientific acceptance that the Aboriginal race was not a 'doomed' one.<sup>34</sup>

In 1935 the *Northern Standard* reported that eighty-five per cent of the births in the Northern Territory in 1934 were 'half-caste' children born of two 'half-caste' parents. Patterson, the minister for the interior, was reported as saying that a new policy was needed to address this particular issue.<sup>35</sup> In 1938 the *Northern Standard* noted that since 1921 the number of 'half-caste' Indigenous people in Australia had more than trebled, and that 'half-castes' had been increasing at a consistently higher average national rate than the white population.<sup>36</sup> The growing 'half-caste' population created problems at three levels: at the ideological level; at the administrative level; and, ultimately, at the policy level.

#### *The ideological problem of the 'half-caste'*

The growing mixed-race population raised several ideological problems for white Australian society. Many viewed people of mixed race as the embodiment of the worst of both races; to white society they were at the very least illegitimate through birth out of wedlock, yet they did not possess the redeeming feature of authentic Aboriginality. Patrick Wolfe has written about the threat posed by these people to

mainstream Australia, and indeed to the colonial project, in these terms:

European society was unified in contradistinction to the Aborigines and vice versa; the two categories mutually constructed each other. Thus hybridity was repulsive because, in threatening the black category, it thereby threatened the white one as well.<sup>37</sup>

Children whose parents were both Indigenous could be conveniently described as 'other', while mixed race children challenged this designation. A conversation between Differ and Oscar in *Capricornia* illustrates this challenge:

Oscar: 'Half-castes should be left in their place - with the Binghis ...'

Differ: 'But why left with the Binghis?'

Oscar: 'Because they're half that.'

Differ: 'What about the other half- the white?'

Oscar: 'That's submerged.'<sup>38</sup>

Others saw matters differently to Oscar. Not all in the community shared the fear of being overtaken by 'half-castes'. One contributor to the *Northern Standard* commented on the need for a larger population for the workforce in the Northern Territory and saw the answer in the 'half-caste' group: 'The progressive blood of the white man pulses in the veins of these people together with that of their native ancestors ... let them populate our land.'<sup>39</sup>

However, it was at the ideological level that *Capricornia* touched a raw nerve, published as it was at the very time when Indigenous policy-makers were coming to the realisation that no current government initiative was able to deal with the growing number of mixed-race offspring. As Mudrooroo writes in his introduction to one edition of *Capricornia*, Herbert addresses the 'fear in the Northern Territory that the white minority population might lose its place of dominance and be replaced by a "Coloured" majority'.<sup>40</sup> This was certainly a fear at the time that *Capricornia* was published. A year earlier, during a 1937 conference of state and commonwealth Indigenous authorities, Cecil Cook, the chief protector of Aborigines in the Northern Territory, had said that in the Northern Territory 'there is now a population of half-castes numbering one-fifth of the total whites ... and it is only a matter of a few years before the half-caste population will approximate that of the white population'. Cook then went so far as to argue that:

unless the black population is speedily absorbed into the white, the process will soon be reversed, and in 50 years, or a little later, the white population of the

Northern Territory will be absorbed into the black.<sup>41</sup>

Cook's comments convinced some of the state and territory representatives at the conference. B S Harkness, from the New South Wales Aborigines Protection Board, commented: 'It is awful to think that the white race in the Northern Territory is liable to be submerged, notwithstanding that on this continent 98 per cent of the population is of British nationality'.<sup>42</sup> Herbert was more than happy to provoke this fear. As one biographer has written, quoting Herbert's letters, Herbert sought:

to mobilise the 'Halfcastes & Quartercastes whose blood is pure Aboriginal & European' into 'a gigantic organization called the Euraustralian League' which

would 'rise up & multiply & eventually sweep the Pommies back into the sea'.<sup>43</sup>

Although Herbert was fond of making outrageous comments to unsettle the establishment, his comment probably reflects his view that people of mixed-race ancestry could make a positive contribution to Australian life.<sup>44</sup>

### *The administrative problem of the 'half-caste'*

The increasing population of people of mixed-race parentage was causing administrative difficulties, with the line dividing Indigenous people from non-Indigenous people becoming ever harder for administrators to draw. Moreover, the policies that informed the legislation controlling Indigenous people in the 1930s were often inconsistent. On the one hand, there was a persistent view among some policy-makers that the colour could be 'bred out' of 'half-castes'; on the other, the view that Indigenous people and 'half-castes' needed protection from white men and thus needed to be kept separate from them. Throughout the 1930s Aboriginal and 'half-caste' women in the Northern Territory were allowed to marry white men with the authority of the protector, but they were not allowed to consort before marriage. This begs the question, how else to marry but to first consort? As one contributor to the *Northern News* asked, 'Under what system does Dr. Cook send forth his unfortunate "half-caste" charges in marriage to white men?'<sup>45</sup> The dearth of white women in the Northern Territory was also a well known fact,<sup>46</sup> as was the assumed associated inevitability that white men would seek sexual satisfaction from relationships with Indigenous women and 'half-castes'.<sup>47</sup> Venereal disease was epidemic, and one administrative response to this health issue was to further control Indigenous and 'half-caste' women.<sup>48</sup>

Although there was some minor pressure from the community for white men to recognise and care for their 'half-caste' progeny, such children were often left in the care of their Indigenous mothers, and subsequently many were removed to 'half-caste' homes.<sup>49</sup> There was a debate canvassed in the *Northern Standard* in 1935 supporting the idea that paternity testing in the form of blood tests should be applied, so that the financial pressure of caring for 'half-castes' should be worn by those with resources who had helped produce them.<sup>50</sup> Often, the blame for the birth of 'half-castes' was placed on the 'notoriously sexually inclined half-caste women' and the failure of their protectors.<sup>51</sup>

Legislation in the 1930s was purportedly in place to protect Indigenous and 'half-caste' women.<sup>52</sup> However, perhaps another aspect of such legislation was to stem the apparent increase in the half-caste population by refusing to allow relationships between white men and Indigenous or 'half caste' women. In any case, the legislation was ineffective. Two major difficulties were the problem of identifying race and the problem of evidence.

The issue of conflict in relation to legislation disallowing consorting and allowing marriage between white men and 'half-caste' women is played out in some of the cases reported in the *Northern Standard* newspaper. In April 1935 William Bonnick-Jones was charged with 'unlawfully and habitually consorting with a half-caste', Maggie Smith.<sup>53</sup> The prosecutor argued that Bonnick-Jones had been warned several times to discontinue his liaison, but Smith had failed on a number of occasions to return to her Darwin compound. The prosecutor asked for a penalty that would deter the behaviour; Bonnick-Jones was fined, but in May was again charged with the same offence. The court heard evidence that he had made an application to the chief protector of Aboriginals to marry Smith but had been refused because of his health. He had been placed on six months probation to see if there could be some improvement in his health. In contravention of the probation, he had gone out bush to live with Smith. On the occasion of his second charge he was sentenced to three months imprisonment. Meanwhile, Smith was charged with being in a prohibited

area.

The general confusion on the question of race and race contact is illustrated in *Capricornia* through Differ's conversation with Oscar about the future of Differ's 'half-caste' daughter:

Differ smiled ... I'll pretend she's a half-caste of another race — Javanese or some such race that the mob doesn't know much about and therefore'll respect. She could pass for a half-caste Javanese. She could pass for a Javanese princess, in fact.<sup>55</sup>

Differ's views about the race confusion of the mob were played out in the Northern Territory courts in the 1930s. For example, in 1935 Peter Thompson was charged with habitually consorting with a 'half-caste' woman named Caroline Babun.<sup>56</sup> His defence to the charge was that Babun was not a 'half-caste'. Thompson advised the court that Babun's father was Singhalese and that her mother was Egyptian. Babun in turn gave evidence that her Egyptian mother had died when she was young and that her father had then taken up with a full-blood Aboriginal woman. The magistrate noted that he had the power to look at Babun's features carefully to decide the question, and found that she could not be the daughter of an Aboriginal woman; the charges were dismissed. Later similar charges against Thompson were brought to the court for a second time and this time the prosecution arranged for evidence to be given by an Indigenous man, Laurie, who stated that he had been present at the birth of Babun and that he could say with certainty that her mother was a full-blood Aboriginal woman. The defence was not given an opportunity to provide evidence, and Thompson was convicted and fined for consorting. There was some evidence that the protector made efforts to keep 'half-castes' and white men separate. The *Northern Standard* reported in 1937 that there was a police 'crackdown' with respect to the

Ordinances, the paper reported that three white men had been charged with living with 'half-castes' without being married to them.<sup>57</sup> The prosecutor argued that the women should receive the protection of the law and two of the men were fined.

The increasing difficulties associated with race distinction and identification are illustrated in another 1937 case where a woman was prosecuted after she failed to return to the half-castes' home. The woman argued that she was not a 'half-caste': she said that her mother was a quarter-caste and her father was a white man, which made her an 'octoroon'. The charge was dismissed. She was subsequently awarded damages after she successfully claimed that she had been wrongfully imprisoned in a half-castes' home.<sup>58</sup>

The Aboriginal protectors<sup>59</sup> and employers of Indigenous women and 'half-castes' were often suggested to be their prime seducers. Herbert gives us the example of the character Humbolt Lace in *Capricornia*.<sup>60</sup> Lace is a white man and a protector of Aborigines. When a 'half-caste' young woman named Connie comes into his care, the reader hears of his desire to 'go combo' — a desire borne out when he seduces Connie. Connie becomes pregnant, and Lace arranges her marriage to a 'half-caste' named Peter Pan.<sup>61</sup> Speaking to Oscar, Lace defended his marriage plan and denied paternity: 'it's no fault of mine she's got into trouble ... Couldn't watch her day and night. I've reported the matter to the Protector.'<sup>62</sup>

Where the abuse of a position of authority over Indigenous women occurred, successful prosecution presented further difficulties. In 1936 Priest was sentenced to nine months imprisonment for releasing a pamphlet critical of the administration of Indigenous affairs. In the pamphlet Priest alleged that a white employer, Leonard

Don, had raped an Indigenous employee, Alice Mindle, in Don's home. This allegation led to Priest being found guilty of libel. No prosecution of the rape had been laid. In the prosecution of the libel case the police alleged that there had been insufficient evidence for a rape charge. Alice Mindle had given both a statement initially to police and then evidence in the libel prosecution. Her statement and evidence supported the defence, that is that Don had raped her; however, the judge found that Mindle's evidence by itself was insufficient.<sup>63</sup>

Markus reports that between 1934 to 1936, nineteen 'half-caste' women were returned from their employment to the Temple Bar home just outside Alice Springs after they became pregnant or contracted venereal disease. The deputy chief protector reported that this was a 'very high percentage of the total number of girls in outside employment'.<sup>64</sup> As a patrol officer at this time, Strehlow found that white pastoralists were employing young Aboriginal women as 'stockmen' and that some of the girls had venereal disease. Similarly, he found that Aboriginal women were visiting miners' camps and were getting food in exchange for sex.<sup>65</sup> Strehlow reported on a positive note to his diary in 1937 that government ministers had: 'Approved, in principle, of Sgt Koop's and my proposed campaign against illicit relationships between blacks, whites and half-castes'.<sup>66</sup> Strehlow had taken police with him, but they had been unable to collect evidence sufficient for any prosecutions. The law about relationships was essentially unpoliceable.<sup>67</sup>

### **Assimilation policy**

The ideological and administrative difficulties mentioned above manifested themselves at governmental level as a severe policy problem that needed direct discussion. Aware now that 'the Aboriginal problem' was not going to disappear of its own accord, administrators had begun in the 1930s to take their own measures to address what was slowly being seen as a national problem. Although state and territory Indigenous affairs administrators were rarely uniform in their opinions, the mid 1930s marked a significant new broad direction in policies nationwide. The policy approach in Indigenous affairs from this time was essentially two-fold: to regulate more extensively the lives of people classed as Aboriginal; and to seek the incorporation of those mixed-race people deemed capable of integration into white society. This new approach was most clearly evident in 1937, when state and territory administrators met to discuss Indigenous policies.

The best available evidence of how policy thinking shifted in the 1930s comes from the report of the conference of 1937 in Canberra. Although it is important not to over-emphasise the significance of the 1937 conference as a watershed moment in and of itself,<sup>68</sup> the report of the conference provides important evidence: no other document shows so transparently the reasoning of administrators in conversation with one another.

The 1937 conference tended to deal separately with 'full blood' and 'halfcaste' problems. With regard to the former, the conference resolved:

That this Conference affirms the principle that the general policy in respect of full-blood natives should be —

(a) To educate to white standard, children of the detribalized living near centres of white population, and subsequently to place them in employment... which will not bring them into economic or social conflict with the white community;

(b) To keep the semi-civilized under a benevolent supervision ...;

(c) To preserve as far as possible the uncivilized native in his normal tribal state by the establishment of inviolable reserves ...<sup>69</sup>

This broad policy direction was backed up by increasingly wide-ranging powers. At the same time that *Capricornia* was being written, the various state and territory jurisdictions in Australia were bolstering their already invasive powers over the lives of Indigenous Australians.

Between 1934 and 1936, Queensland, South Australia, Western Australia and New South Wales legislated to either restate or increase the power of administrators<sup>70</sup> to remove Indigenous people to reserves or other institutions. In both Western Australia and Queensland, legislation was passed at this time that enabled authorities for the first time to compel Indigenous people to be subjected to medical procedures.<sup>71</sup> In the Northern Territory, the subject of *Capricornia*, the 1930s saw increasing power exercised by authorities over Indigenous lives. Drinking laws became tighter, and Indigenous people became explicitly barred from receiving some benefits that others took for granted.<sup>72</sup> In addition to the laws becoming more restrictive, their reach was growing, with ever-greater numbers of Indigenous people coming under the control of state and territory authorities, a process known as 'coming under the Act'.<sup>73</sup>

The most significant development of the 1930s was that jurisdictions had begun, one by one, to make an active policy decision to integrate mixed race people into white society. Though the term 'assimilation' was only used occasionally at the 1937 conference,<sup>74</sup> the new policy direction would come to be known by that name. This development was exemplified by one motion at the 1937 conference:

That this Conference believes that the destiny of the natives of aboriginal origin, but not of the full blood, lies in their ultimate absorption by the people of the Commonwealth and it therefore recommends that all efforts be directed to that end.<sup>75</sup>

The use of the word 'absorption' here carries with it all the confusion that would come to be associated with 'assimilation'. Did it refer to biological absorption, namely the loss through inter-breeding of physical characteristics? Or did it refer to absorption in the sense of social integration? Proponents of both the biological and social strands of absorption and assimilation were present at the 1937 conference.

In discussing the so-called 'breeding out' of Aboriginality, it is necessary to bear in mind the distinction we referred to earlier between the active attempt to breed out racial characteristics and the more passive expectation that increased inter-racial interaction would eventually result in this. Some officials at the 1937 conference, which McGregor notes occurred at the high point in the search for biological absorption in Australia, sought to pursue an active program to breed out Aboriginality. Among the active biological absorptionists at the conference were the two leading administrators in Western Australia and the Northern Territory: A O Neville, the commissioner of native affairs in Western Australia, and Cecil Cook, the Northern Territory's chief protector of Aboriginals.<sup>76</sup>

As an advocate for the breeding out of Aboriginality, Cook saw no reason to stop with people of mixed race:

The policy of the Commonwealth is to do everything possible to convert the half-caste into a white citizen. The question arises whether the same policy should not be adopted in regard to the aborigines. In my opinion, there are three alternatives. First, we may adopt a policy of *laissez faire*, which, to every Protector of Aborigines, is repugnant; secondly, we may develop an enlightened elaborate system of protection which will produce an aboriginal population that is likely to swamp the white; or, thirdly, we may

follow a policy under which the aboriginal will be absorbed into the white population.<sup>77</sup>

Cook favoured the third option. Neville differed slightly from Cook, believing that 'full-blooded' Indigenous people would eventually 'die out' of their own accord and that absorption policies had to concentrate on people of mixed race. It was in this context that he asked: 'Are we going to have a population of 1,000,000 blacks in the Commonwealth, or are we going to merge them into our white community and eventually forget that there ever were any aborigines in Australia?'<sup>78</sup> Neville also told conference delegates that:

Western Australia has gone further in the development of ... a long-range policy than has any other State, by accepting the view that ultimately the natives must be absorbed into the white population of Australia.<sup>79</sup>

As Neville later commented: 'I see no objection to the ultimate absorption into our own race of the whole of the existing Australian native race.'<sup>80</sup>

While the Northern Territory and Western Australia for a time had the biological absorption of Aboriginality as one of their chief goals, it was social integration that<sup>81</sup> best came to characterise the policy aims of state and territory administrations. South Australian Chief Protector of Aborigines M T McLean told the 1937 conference that:

Most people, I think, are of the opinion that the half-castes and those of lesser degree of aboriginal blood should ultimately be absorbed. People of other races are being absorbed in Australia to-day and are becoming part and parcel of our general community. We have Greeks, Maltese, and Italians, in particular, entering into the communal life of our cities and country towns.

While McLean went on to state his belief that this integration would soon have biological consequences, his concern was not primarily to 'breed out colour' but to change the 'reliability, independence and ability to maintain themselves' of people of mixed race, particularly those who had been raised in institutions.<sup>82</sup> Here was a call for a primarily social rather than biological form of assimilation, and it was one that in time would come to dominate Indigenous administrations.

From the 1930s, the increasing numbers of mixed-race children led policy-makers to the realisation that ongoing ideological and practical difficulties would be caused by the continued attempt to maintain a rigid line separating Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. These realisations made the policy of assimilation extremely attractive. The adoption of the policy of assimilation was not immediate, but between the 1930s and the 1950s assimilation became the dominant Indigenous affairs policy in all mainland jurisdictions. As we have discussed, the assimilation policy was vague and contained a variety of divergent strands: some assimilationists, who would become the majority, sought to force mixed-race people to integrate socially with non-Indigenous Australia, while some sought and implemented policies designed actively to breed out Aboriginality. Among the social integrationists there continued to be debate about the extent to which Indigenous people should be forced to forego social and cultural ties. But the broad attraction of the policy of assimilation was the promise that it held for the 'ultimate absorption' (in a cultural, if not in a racial sense) of Aboriginality by white Australia, a promise that would end the myriad headaches being caused by the attempts to separate white and black. But just as biological absorptionists hadn't counted on the survival of the Aboriginal race, nor did the ascendant social integrationists count on the survival of

Indigenous culture.



Minerva Access is the Institutional Repository of The University of Melbourne

**Author/s:**

Chesterman, J;Douglas, H

**Title:**

'Their ultimate absorption': Assimilation in 1930s Australia

**Date:**

2004-01-01

**Citation:**

Chesterman, J. & Douglas, H. (2004). 'Their ultimate absorption': Assimilation in 1930s Australia. *Journal of Australian Studies*, 28 (81), pp.47-58. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14443050409387937>.

**Publication Status:**

Published

**Persistent Link:**

<http://hdl.handle.net/11343/33427>