

## Preface

As I finish this thesis, newspapers are again dominated by headlines about widespread domestic violence in Aboriginal communities. One prevailing mood is that many communities that have attempted to retain their distinctiveness as Aboriginal peoples have failed and have been failed, with terrible human costs. Another is that political imperatives at play in Aboriginal affairs in this election year are skewing perceptions. This latter mood underlines the difficulty this thesis faces in exhuming an Idealist philosophical legacy as a useable past for a generation that has learnt cynicism as a basic aspect of literacy. From another angle, this thesis would be vulnerable to the attack that it uses Aborigines' experience as mere context for yet another exploration of whitefella thinking.

However, ideas and ideals, imperfectly but fervently pursued, were determining factors in the history here told. If A. P. Elkin had not been a searching Christian, his agnostic faith sustained by philosophical Idealism, the alliance between racial science and an eliminationist tendency inherent in 'white Australian' settler colonialism may well have remained ascendent through the 1930s, with unknowable implications for post-war directions in Australian colonialism.

Elkin displaced the racial point of view for religious reasons and with religious goals that were themselves being displaced, first among intellectuals and from the 1960s more broadly in Australian society. In the language of the 1930s, A. P. Elkin wrote of the challenge to manage cultural change so 'that primitive man may still feel at home in the universe.'<sup>1</sup> In the 1970s, W. E. H. Stanner expressed the problem from an Aboriginal point of view in his book title 'White Man Got No Dreaming'.<sup>2</sup> The religious quality perceived as vulnerable in the one case and absent in the other, as it interacted with policy questions in Aboriginal affairs in the crucial years from 1928 to 1933, has not been studied in its own right until now.

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<sup>1</sup> AP Elkin, 'Civilized Aborigines and Native Culture', *Oceania* VI (2), December 1935, 117–146, at 145.

<sup>2</sup> WEH Stanner, *White Man Got No Dreaming : Essays 1938-1973* (Canberra : Australian National University Press, 1979).

## **Acknowledgements and sources**

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My research has drawn heavily on Elkin's published articles and books, the Elkin Papers in the University of Sydney Archives, and secondary sources, as cited. The argument of each chapter is my own, as is the overall argument.