Creating White Australia

Edited by Jane Carey and Claire McLisky

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Calculating colour: whiteness, anthropological research and the Cummeragunja Aboriginal Reserve, May and June 1938

Fiona Davis, University of Melbourne

On a sunny afternoon in late May 1938, two anthropologists, Joseph Birdsell and Norman Tindale, and their wives, Dorothy Tindale and Bee Birdsell, arrived for a short stay at the Cummeragunja Aboriginal Reserve, situated on the banks of the Murray River in southern New South Wales. Through what appeared to be good luck rather than good management, the group drove through the reserve’s gates just after the Aborigines Protection Board chief inspector Ernest Smithers who had come from Sydney for what was a big day for the reserve’s inhabitants: the commemoration of Empire Day. Their participation, though ironic, appeared at least superficially voluntary. Given indications of some contemporary Aboriginal faith in the residual goodwill of the British Crown, the Cummeragunja people perhaps nurtured some hope that the royal head of the empire would one day prevail over the Australian settler government and offer them rights as Indigenous people.1 Either way, on

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1 For more on these perceptions on Maloga Mission see Claire McLisky, “‘The free enjoyment of our possessions’: Aboriginal and missionary interests in the Maloga petitions of 1881 and 1887” (Paper presented at the New worlds, new sovereignties: a cross-community interdisciplinary international conference, Melbourne, Australia, 6–9 June 2008). For a more general discussion see Heather Goodall, Invasion to embassy: land in Aboriginal politics in New South Wales, 1770–1972 (St Leonards: Allen & Unwin, in association with Black Dog Books, 1997; reprinted Sydney; Sydney University Press, 2008), 102.
this day and, apparently, on every 24 May since the late 1880s, residents young and old had donned costumes, decorated their cars and bikes, and paraded through the streets in cheerful spirits. A returned Anzac soldier in full uniform led a colourful parade that included ‘Decorated motor floats with streamers and gaily dressed children, black minstrels playing in a gum leaf band and decorated bicycles’. Tindale and Birdsell quickly set up their motion picture camera to capture the event.

The presence of the two scientists at this event highlights the complicated and often conflicting nature of understandings of empire, race and whiteness at this time. Here the Cummeragunja residents are celebrating their inclusion within the British Empire, while on the margins of these festivities are Birdsell and Tindale, their very presence as anthropologists, there to study the ‘otherness’ of Aboriginal people, undermining to a certain extent this community’s claims to inclusion. Using a framework of whiteness I plan to highlight the unacknowledged and often contradictory power of whiteness, hinted at on this day and deeply embedded in Tindale and Birdsell’s research trip to the reserve. The use of whiteness studies in this instance is particularly effective, as it helps to highlight the mechanisms of power that underwrote life on the reserve at this time. The records from the expedition, I will demonstrate, reveal that ideas of whiteness, far from being simply an intellectual endeavour, had very real implications for Aboriginal Australians.

My chapter will begin with a discussion of the emerging field of whiteness studies in Australia and the debate regarding research into Aboriginal people. I will then look at the (male) figures highlighted in the records left from the expedition, now kept in the Museum of South Australia, for what they tell us of the working of whiteness, including the notions of superiority and the justification of control over Aboriginal people that this entailed. I will next turn to the response from the

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Cummeragunja people. How did the community react to the expedition’s visit? What authority, if any, were they able to hold over this research? The final section of this paper will look at the legacy of this visit today and the question of who now has authority in the expedition records.

The hidden power of whiteness and white privilege has been a growing field of interest for historians over the last decade. In *The cultivation of whiteness* (2002), Warwick Anderson considered the history of medical and scientific conceptions of race in Australia, with a particular focus on shifting ideas of whiteness. Here Anderson wrote that: ‘In thus marking whiteness, even within such broad parameters, doctors and scientists gave the national type of body and mentality to which it may aspire’. In the same year, Russell McGregor built on the ideas set out in his 1997 publication *Imagined destinies* in an article which examined the commitment of Australian authorities and scientists to ‘breed out’ Aboriginal people of mixed descent during the interwar period, in the name of achieving a white Australia. He observed that in these years: ‘While the spectre of a “rising tide of colour” inspired administrators to systematise their absorptionist practices, contemporary racial science lent some credibility to their efforts.

The attempts of white ‘experts’ to speak for Aboriginal people, particularly, have attracted increasing critique. Within this is the fraught issue of the contingencies of research into Aboriginal people. As Maori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith has observed, the ‘word itself, “research”, is probably one of the dirtiest words in the indigenous world’s vocabulary’. Anthropology is a significant offender, as it has, according to Tuhiwai

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5 Russell McGregor, “‘Breed out the colour’ or the importance of being white’, *Australian Historical Studies* 33.120 (2002): 290.

Smith, been ‘implicated in the worst excesses of colonialism’. Certainly, scientific investigations throughout the 19th century and at least into the first half of the 20th often sought to reinforce notions of Aboriginal inferiority, and necessarily, European superiority. Not surprisingly, then, many academics have described this desire of colonisers to know Indigenous people as ‘a fundamental part of the power structures of colonial society’. Anthropology also, however, unsettled some of the prevailing ideas held by colonists while at the same time prompting discussions and highlighting facts that made authorities uncomfortable.

This area has, not surprisingly, stimulated considerable scholarly reflexivity on methodology. Penelope Edmonds, for instance, has criticised what she describes as the ‘lack of detailed scholarship that historicises the operations of whiteness in specific times and localities’. She continues: ‘If, Homi Bhabha suggests, whiteness is a “strategy of authority” rather than an authentic or essential “identity”, it is also observable that whiteness as a “strategy” may be authorised through (constructed) environments and spaces’. My discussion, then, is to be

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7 Ibid.
8 For more on anthropology in Australia see Geoffrey Gray, A cautious silence: the politics of Australian anthropology (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2007).
9 For example, Ann Laura Stoler and Frederick Cooper have observed that: ‘A large colonial bureaucracy occupied itself, especially from the 1860s, with classifying people and their attributes’. According to Stoler and Cooper, colonial regimes then used this knowledge to ‘define the constituents of a certain kind of society’ and in turn employ this to demonstrate that their ‘cultural knowledge qualified them to govern’. See Stoler and Cooper, ‘Between metropole and colony: rethinking a research agenda’, in Tensions of empire: colonial cultures in a bourgeois world, eds. Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 11.
10 Ibid. 14.
12 Ibid. 364.
grounded in a specific place—Cummeragunja—at a specific time—May and June 1938—and will clearly reveal the impact of ideas relating to whiteness on this community.

**White ‘experts’**

Particularly from the time the Maloga Mission was established in the early 1870s, Aboriginal people living alongside the Murray River near Echuca had faced considerable pressure to live under white rule.13 This control was maintained when the New South Wales government established the Cummeragunja Aboriginal Reserve and the bulk of the residents shifted from life under the missionaries Daniel and Janet Matthews to life under an employee of the state. While theoretically residents could move on and off the reserve, they needed the manager’s approval to do so. Further, if they found themselves unemployed at any time, as was frequent due to the seasonal nature of work in the region, they were ineligible for government assistance. Many had little option but to live off the meagre rations offered on the reserve, and, accordingly, live under the vagaries of the current manager’s rule. Some residents had a brief foray into independence when small blocks of land were allocated for individual farming enterprises. This ended in 1907 when the blocks were revoked for communal farming—later to be leased out to white farmers. The NSW Aborigines Protection Board claimed these blocks were mismanaged, despite significant evidence to the contrary.14

The *Aboriginal Protection Act* of 1909 gave white authorities the power to remove Aboriginal people of mixed descent from reserves, allowing only ‘full bloods’ and ‘half-castes’ over the age of 34 to remain. This control was increased in 1915. It is estimated that by 1921,

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14 Goodall, 126.
Cummeragunja’s population was half what it was in 1908, as the Act was enforced and, effectively, the whitest of the residents were forced to leave. Authorities also removed children in the years that followed, placing them in domestic service, or the Cootamundra Girls Home. Families who had once relied on the forest and the river to provide for their daily food now had to stock their cupboards with adequate bought foodstuffs to prevent white inspectors accusing them of ‘neglect’ and taking their children.

The idea of a joint Harvard-Adelaide expedition to study the nation’s Aboriginal people of mixed descent lay in the collegial contact of Adelaide University’s Norman Tindale and E.A. Hooton, an anthropology professor from Harvard University, and his anthropology graduate student, Joseph Birdsell. It was planned that Tindale, who had met with the pair during a visit to the States in 1936, would study the genealogies, while Birdsell conducted measuring. Their approach reflected the scientists’ belief that not only did race exist, but that it incorporated both the physical and the social, with ‘mental traits, such as an Aboriginal way of thinking or the nomad instinct, [considered] inherited or race specific’. To quote Ian Keen, in this approach: ‘Difficulties of social adjustment … are attributed to the type of cross, not to historical, social and cultural factors.’

15 Ibid. 130.
17 D’Arcy, 74.
18 Ian Keen, ‘Norman Tindale and me: anthropology, genealogy, authenticity’, in Connections in native title: genealogies, kinship and groups, eds. J.D. Finlayson, B. Rigsby and H.J. Bek (Canberra: Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, Australian National University), 102. For more on the preoccupations of scientific studies of race during the interwar period see Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds, Drawing the global colour line: white
The plans for the expedition were timely. The 1930s had seen authorities express growing concern over the increasing numbers of Aboriginal people of mixed descent. In 1937 Commonwealth and State Authorities of Aboriginal People decided that the ‘destiny’ of these people of mixed descent, or this ‘half-caste problem’ as it was termed, lay ‘in their ultimate absorption’ into the rest of the population and that ‘all efforts [were to] be directed to that end’. With such interest in the topic, then, Tindale and Birdsell appeared assured of the governmental support essential to their 14 month journey, which was to take them across south-east Australia as well as parts of Queensland, Western Australia, and Tasmania. The assistance they needed was not merely financial—although funding was also welcome—rather, they would rely on government representatives to allow them to access their subjects: reserves, for the most part, were not public spaces and they could not be entered without some kind of approval. ‘It is agreed’, wrote Hooton accordingly before the project began, ‘that there should be stressed the capacity of the hybrids for adapting themselves to European civilisation, since this group of the population constitutes a government problem.’

When Birdsell, Tindale and their respective wives, Bee and Dorothy, reached Cummeragunja in late May 1938 it seemed the necessary assistance would, indeed, be forthcoming. Smithers and the reserve’s manager, A.J. McQuiggin, greeted the group, as Birdsell noted in his diary: ‘Protector Smithers of Sydney gave us a hearty welcome + NSW co-operation seems fully assured.’ While McQuiggin’s reach may not

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*men’s countries and the international challenge of racial equality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).


have been as impressive as that of Smithers, who could coordinate access all over the state, he was able to offer some boys to assist them. ‘Set up camps very nicely near the station hall and found the manager most helpful; a team of boys bringing us wood + water + setting up our tents for us’, wrote Tindale that evening. Later that night the community held an Empire Day concert and dance, an event for which they had been preparing for months. Not surprisingly, Tindale felt he was a qualified judge on the community’s performance, noting somewhat patronisingly in his diary: ‘The songs and items were well sung and acted and some of the people showed talent which would not be amiss in any white community.’ He and Birdsell both took to the dance floor as the evening wore on, but the real highlight for them was in the research they were able to surreptitiously conduct. While Birdsell took particular note of the physical appearance of the attendees, noting a preponderance of Tasmanians, Tindale asked Smithers about the number of white men present who were either engaged or married to the reserve’s women. Smithers, who has been described as ‘a professional civil servant’ who ‘considered himself knowledgeable on Aboriginal conditions, customs and psychology’, was apparently all too happy to help. ‘These unions’, he explained to Tindale, ‘do not tend to last’. He remarked that despite this, Aboriginal people sought them out. Smithers would no doubt have been irritated to know that his claim was later contradicted, apparently unknowingly, by one of the Cummeragunja men, who told Tindale that while Smithers supported interracial unions, the type of white people interested in marrying Aboriginal people were ‘only … the lowest, the scum of the earth’. Despite the spuriousness of his expertise, Smithers

22 Tindale, 88–91.
23 Ibid. 91.
continued to be of valuable assistance to Tindale. The following morning
the pair met to discuss the expedition’s route through New South Wales.
In between working on genealogies, Tindale made another call on
Smithers and his hosts, McQuiggin and his wife, that evening.

Despite this call and, one would assume, other social engagements
with McQuiggin, the most influential day-to-day authority on the
reserve, neither Birdsell nor Tindale note any of his opinions about
Cummeragunja people. Perhaps he refused to participate, although he
clearly agreed to allow the men on to the reserve, or maybe the opinions
of this man, described by residents later as violent and controlling, held
little interest for Tindale and Birdsell. Even when the community speaks
out against the reserve, McQuiggin is never mentioned specifically. Their
silence is more understandable, however: those who acted against him
risked retribution, as events over the following year would demonstrate.

One white man whose opinions were closely noted was the teacher
Thomas Austin. Austin had taught at the school for close to a decade
when Birdsell and Tindale arrived, and clearly considered himself an
expert on not just Cummeragunja people, but Aboriginal people
generally. The problem, he told Tindale, was that Aboriginal people
developed earlier and this impeded their intellectual growth. He cited
two examples to support his case: one was a boy who was sexually active
and slow in school; the other, a 12-year-young girl who performed well in
her studies and had not yet hit puberty. Austin explained to Tindale that
while the station rations did not fulfil dietary requirements, they in fact
benefited the children’s performance in school as their malnutrition
slowed their development. Wrote Tindale after their meeting:
‘Undersized native children, partly starved even do better ... for they are
late in arriving at maturity and so advance further on the path to
educative efficiency.’ Disturbingly, the advice Austin doled out to
Tindale was not just the confused musings of a local school man, with no

26 Tindale, 99.
reach outside the Cummeragunja school, although this would have been problematic enough. Austin’s expertise had, in fact, formed the basis of a recent paper written by Sydney anthropology professor, A.P. Elkin, on that very topic.\textsuperscript{27} Austin’s advice extended further than just the children, however: he also furnished Tindale with the list of the most intelligent members of the community, including one woman he described as ‘most thrifty and honest’.\textsuperscript{28} Austin’s assistance was particularly important to Tindale in his plans to test the intelligence of children at the school. With Austin’s help, Tindale was able to find out more about the ‘home environment’ and ‘previous schooling’ of the children, and, using the genealogies already collected, ‘to place them in their genetic classes’\textsuperscript{29}.

The local doctor, Dr Graham, is the next figure to move from historical obscurity into the limelight during the visit. A picture of malnourishment and ill health emerges in this interview, conducted by Birdsell, in which the doctor complains about the inadequate food on the reserve. Rations were limited to flour, sugar, tea and only occasionally fruit and vegetables, which had led to numerous stomach problems. He suggested to Birdsell that ‘the government may tacitly wish these hybrids to die out—at least they [are] doing a good job to help them.’\textsuperscript{30} His discussion of disease on Cummeragunja, however, reveals he is not entirely a sympathetic character. He tells Birdsell that one girl infected five men with gonorrhoea, and called for the power to segregate such cases. It is assumed the segregation was to be directed at the girl and not the men involved. The welfare of the girl involved, meanwhile, and the circumstances surrounding her prostitution is not remarked upon. Dr Graham also, according to Birdsell, ‘wanted the authority to send

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\textsuperscript{27} Ibid. 97.
\textsuperscript{28} Ibid. 113.
\textsuperscript{29} Ibid. 107.
\textsuperscript{30} Birdsell, 9.
\end{flushright}
venereal disease and tuberculosis patients to Sydney for segregation’, a popular strategy for dealing with such cases over the years.\footnote{Ibid.}

\textbf{Community responses}

On the one hand, the expedition to Cummeragunja was one of white authority. Here were two white men, who not only had the audacity to measure and calculate the racial status of the Cummeragunja community, but who did so with the permission, and, in most cases, the testimony of the white authorities related to the reserve. On the other hand, however, there is an underlying story which, while it does not overturn this overwhelming authority, does destabilise it. The Cummeragunja people and their forebears had a long history of political activism. This had begun just 25 years after the first settlers arrived in the region and had led to a formal petition for the return of some of their land in the 1880s.\footnote{Rod Hagen, ‘Ethnographic information and anthropological interpretations in a Native Title claim: the Yorta Yorta experience’, \textit{Aboriginal History} 25 (2001): 217.}

Throughout the 1930s, a number of Cummeragunja people joined, or even created, Aboriginal rights movements. William Cooper was one whose efforts took him to Melbourne, and even saw him petition the King, while also writing critical letters to the German and American leaders of the time for their behaviour.\footnote{For more on William Cooper see Andrew Markus, eds., \textit{Blood for a stone: William Cooper and the Australian Aborigines’ League} (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1988), and also Bain Attwood and Andrew Markus, \textit{Thinking black: William Cooper and the Australian Aborigines’ League} (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2004).}

The community was aware, at least to a certain extent, of its rights, and was unlikely to allow these two men to measure their bodies and write down their family relationships unquestioningly. Accordingly, just four days in Birdsell noted in his diary that one informant ‘indicates station conversation subversive and situation seems to be indicated developing which calls for “Town Meeting”—to explain purpose of study.’\footnote{Birdsell, 7.} Meanwhile, two children whose
parents had talked ‘non cooperation’ did not apply themselves in their school tests.35 Neither of these objections were followed up; no town meeting was held and clearly the children were not exempted from the testing. Ultimately, these white men had the benefit of their white authority: the objections of Aboriginal people did not need to be taken too seriously.

The community’s opinions were most clearly expressed when the researchers interviewed them about their health and level of assimilation. In these we hear the views, in many cases taken down verbatim, of the Aboriginal people that did not go on to become famous like William Cooper, or the pastor and footballer Doug Nicholls, but who lived their lives, for the most part, outside of the spotlight. In these interviews, the ‘ordinary’ Aboriginal people had the rare experience of being questioned by a white authority as to what they thought. Rather than merely discussing the influenza which plagued them from time to time or their love of the Bible, many of these men seized this opportunity to explain to Tindale the many wrongs which had been perpetrated on Cummeragunja people. One man who now read only religious sermons, books by a Dr Tolnodies and the Christian Herald, complained that Aboriginal rights to land had been severely curtailed. The bulk of the reserve was leased to a white farmer and his own daughter was ‘turned off when fishing and camping there’.36 Another man pointed to the loss of the farm blocks, remarking there was ‘deep resentment among people at this action’. Cummeragunja men, he said, were now forced to work away in Victoria.37 The failure of white farmers to employ Aboriginal people was pointed to by yet another Cummeragunja resident, who observed: ‘Promises given of work in forests have been token’.38 This reluctance to employ Cummeragunja residents was a particularly painful issue at this

35 Tindale, 107.
36 Tindale and Birdsell.
37 Ibid.
38 Ibid.

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time; the reserve had been hit hard by the Depression, its population ballooning as Aboriginal people returned to receive rations, ineligible for any other government assistance under current laws, while local employment had plummeted.39

Eight months after Tindale, Birdsell, and their wives departed Cummeragunja tensions came to head on the reserve. Conditions had worsened during 1938 and the highly unpopular manager, McQuiggin, who had been so helpful to Tindale and Birdsell, had not taken kindly to the petition that residents had sent to the Aborigines Protection Board calling for his removal. In February 1939, John Patten, a relative of some of the Cummeragunja people and an activist from Sydney, visited and urged them to take action. Days later, at least 100 residents packed their things and crossed the river to camp at Barmah; many never returned.40

Three years after his visit, Tindale drew on some of the problems found at Cummeragunja to support his findings that while Aboriginal people of mixed descent could be assimilated successfully, the reserve system was not the answer. His conclusions appeared to address the concerns of the Aboriginal men who had complained in their health interviews, although they overlooked the very real attachment—and feeling of entitlement—to land, which had underpinned these complaints. Calling for qualified teachers and for vocational training, Tindale cited the example of the farming training given to Aboriginal people on Cummeragunja at the end of the 19th century and the early 20th century: ‘although the training itself was ultimately abandoned, the good results are evidence in that some of the older men still find ready employment and good remuneration in the adjoining districts in New

South Wales and Victoria.\textsuperscript{41} Tindale appeared to link a subsequent lack of training to the growing dissatisfaction on the reserve: ‘It will be remembered that there is increasing unrest and maladjustment at this place, which in former times was one of the most successful experiments in Australia.’\textsuperscript{42}

The unrest at Cummeragunja is a frequent theme in Tindale’s report. Discussing the role of missions and reserves, he writes that although they may be justified following early contact with Europeans, they mainly provided a site now for full bloods to die out and for the mixed groups to grow. He cited Cummeragunja and Cape Barren Island as examples, writing: ‘In such communities there may be even a passive revolt against control and movements away from the area in which the people are retained.’\textsuperscript{43} Tindale here highlights an important contradiction in the role of missions and reserve in settler colonies: at the same time as they provided sites where Aboriginal people could be both contained and studied, they were also supposed to be a training ground for assimilation, after which properly trained Indigenous people could join the broader white community. Further, while these institutions attempted to break down traditional community links, Aboriginal people responded by rebuilding and strengthening their communities.

While it may have been too late to stop the revolt on Cummeragunja, the findings of the expedition still had an impact on the community. It may well have spurred on attempts by the Aborigines Welfare Board, the body which replaced the Protection Board, to close down the reserve, attempts that were successfully fought by those residents who stayed or returned after the walk-off. Most notably, the expedition produced an

\textsuperscript{42} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{43} Ibid. 157.
impressive archive of photographs and accounts which are now of value to the reserve’s descendants. While these photographs rated little mention in either of the two scientists’ diaries, they are now important artefacts for many within the Cummeragunja community. Copies are kept, both communally and individually, on the reserve, and the genealogies are also accessed and discussed, if not always agreed with.44

One of the oldest people still living on Cummeragunja remembered the expedition positively when interviewed in 2009. Josie Smith, was 13 years old when Tindale and Birdsell arrived at Cummeragunja. Her picture is there with the others: well dressed in what appears to be a home-made tunic, if judged by the uneven spacing of its buttons, Smith seems to be frowning at the camera. Trying to judge her attitude to the photographer from her expression and body language, I am tempted to conclude that she resented the intrusion in her life. Yet when I interview Smith over 70 years later, my interpretation did not fit with her memories of a tall, friendly man who measured her feet ‘to see how much they’d grown’.45 In Smith’s memory Tindale was a welcome guest on the reserve, although she finds it difficult to explain his bizarre attempts to measure her and her siblings, laughing at the ridiculousness of his endeavours. Smith, however, now treasures the photographs left from the visit, although she has less respect for the genealogies, as she says some in the community question their accuracy. Nevertheless, Smith does not recall any opposition at the time to Tindale. She said that she, personally, was happy for him to visit: ‘it didn’t worry me. I mean, he was a nice man too and he always looked after the Koorie people as well.’46 Heather Goodall has discussed this importance of photographs to Aboriginal communities, including those Tindale and Birdsell left after their visit to

44 For more on the value of Tindale’s photographs to Aboriginal communities see Heather Goodall’s account of the Brewarrina community in “Karroo mates”—communities reclaim their images’, Aboriginal History 30 (2006): 48–66.
45 Josie Smith (pseudonym), interview with the author, 23 March 2009, Cummeragunja.
46 Ibid.
the Brewarrina reserve. She wrote that these images appeared different when seen ‘in frames on family walls or carefully placed in albums’, than when seen in the archive booklet:

Certainly the families’ own sense of having brought these images back to be among relations has coloured the way they are seen and read, to override the tension between the survey team and their subjects with the closeness of past and present family ties.47

Similarly, Gaynor Macdonald has written of the importance of photographs, regardless of the type, to Aboriginal people in confirming genealogies, remarking: ‘photos of kin link one to ancestors and to one’s children’s children when myth and history cannot’.48

Speaking to other Cummeragunja people, however, it becomes clear that Smith’s memories are more positive than many. One woman claimed the researchers measured the heads of the Cummera people—although the parts of the research cards dedicated to head measurements are blank. Perhaps this memory is more to do with the invasiveness of the visit than cold, hard fact. Other people told me that residents were forced to comply or not receive their rations. Many resent Tindale’s genealogies, which were later used in the unsuccessful Yorta Yorta Native Title case in the 1990s.49 This claim for land was brought forward by the descendants of the Yorta Yorta/Bangerang people who had lived on and around Cummeragunja, and, ultimately, failed because white records were used to prove that, in the words of Justice Olney in his 1998 Federal Court judgement: ‘The tide of history has indeed washed away any real acknowledgement of their traditional customs’.50 Olney’s findings were

49 For more on Tindale’s research and the Yorta Yorta Native Title Case see Hagen.
later supported when the decision was appealed before a full bench in the Federal Court, and again in 2002 in the High Court. While the 19th-century reminiscences of Edward Curr, a pastoralist and, later, an ethnographer, are widely acknowledged as key to this, important, too, were the records that emerged from Tindale and Birdsell’s visit, in particular those relating to tribal boundaries and genealogies. Writing later, anthropologist Rod Hagen, who was involved with the case, observed:

Indigenous groups, not surprisingly, are highly indignant about having their claims, and the primarily oral traditions on which they are based, judged against the writings of the initial colonisers themselves and on occasion react even more strongly against later ‘academic’ interpretations of territorial interests, best epitomised perhaps by the work of Norman Tindale.

Conclusion
The power of whiteness embedded in the Harvard-Adelaide expedition’s visit to Cummeragunja is not as straightforward as it may at first appear. This research and the thinking that underpinned it had an undeniable impact on the lives of Aboriginal people, both then and now, at local, state and federal levels. The Cummeragunja people came under the scrutiny and, in some cases, the rule of a string of white figures of authority, including those who oversaw the reserve, such as the manager, the teacher, the doctor and the chief inspector, as well as those in scientific circles like Tindale, Birdsell and Hooton. Tindale and Birdsell’s diaries reveal that these ‘experts’ on Aboriginal people used their expertise to legitimise varying levels of authority over Aboriginal Australians at this time. Later, the records were also used to override Aboriginal land claims. Yet the expedition did not simply reinforce white authority. Not only were the researchers ultimately critical of

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51 Hagen, 225.
52 Ibid. 216.
contemporary government policy, but the Cummeragunja people did have a level of agency in this process, at times objecting, and at others trying, as best they could, to direct the research to their own advantage. Moreover, parts of these records are valued by the community today.

Studies which, like this one, critically revisit research into Aboriginal people have the power to destabilise the white authority that they previously stood for. As Gillian Cowlishaw in her book *Rednecks, eggheads and blackfellas* has written, ‘by delegitimising the tainted and outworn body of racial knowledge which has been inherited from the past, it might be possible to recognise that local Aborigines, with their particular historical experiences, are the final authorities on their own worlds’. From the calls for a town meeting to the resurrection of the expedition’s photos in recent years, an alternate reading of the Harvard-Adelaide records also reveals Aboriginal people defying the profoundly inequitable power relations confronting them and continuing to demonstrate at least some level of authority over their lives and their past.

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