CHAPTER 1

A COMPELLING NEED

It is a … truism that human beings are moulded and formed by their cultures. Control of what is taught and preached is vital in any society and has been the root cause of crucial conflicts in many countries (Perry, in Hughes: 1993).

Overview: Ethnographic and Historical

This chapter provides a brief introduction to the history of the Murrin Bridge people since traditional times and an overview of contemporary life and conditions in the community. It ends with a brief description of the fieldwork and research conducted in the community and elsewhere in Australia, mainly in Victoria, New South Wales (NSW), the Northern Territory (NT), and Melanesia. Such historical and cultural background knowledge is necessary for educators and community developers seeking to understand the need for, and place of, Indigenous knowledge and pedagogy in their programs.

The members, all with Aboriginal and European ancestry, of this small Indigenous community, live on the eastern fringe of extensive dry inland plains that stretch between the Lachlan and Darling Rivers in western NSW. Since the mid-nineteenth century the region has undergone enormous pastoral and agricultural development. This has had profound ramifications for the descendants of the people who formerly possessed this land.

From the 1820s white settlers in New South Wales realised that fortunes could be made from extensive wool production in Australia. With their convict-workers they ventured out from the coastal regions to ‘squat’ on the lands of the inland tribes. They commandeered hundreds of square miles of land for their sheep, cleared the land by massacring or driving off the original owners and protected the frontier with a united militia against Aboriginal resistance. They ‘dispersed’ the clans and tribes to ‘clear the run’ (often euphemisms for shooting, poisoning and intimidation) and, once suppressed, the survivors were permitted to camp near the owners’ headquarters, to earn their living by working with stock or becoming farm labourers. As Charles Darwin observed, “Wherever the European has trod, death seems to pursue the aboriginal.” The old people at Murrin Bridge, the burba generation (those who had been traditionally initiated) told me about ‘the killing times’, recounting that there were massacres in the far west of NSW as recently as the 1920s. However, they were vague regarding places, times, numbers and other details.

For the Wangaaypuwan and their neighbours this change in circumstance was catastrophic. They ceased living as politically independent gatherer-hunters, their economy was smashed and the fabric of their social life torn apart. During this period
(the 1820s to 1880s) the original inhabitants of the inland plains were a people being placed in bondage to a new rural Australian social order. The social and historical complexities of this pastoral adaptation are important. Closer pastoral settlement in the early years of the 20th century, because of the growth of soldier settlement schemes and the building of the Condobolin to Broken Hill railway, meant these groups or ‘mobs’ of Indigenous pastoral workers, created by adaptation to pastoralism, could not be maintained by the smaller properties.

Similar histories are found across Australia. The Indigenous Australians were displaced. Being poor, landless and subject to the vagaries of the laissez faire capitalist economy, their plight became an embarrassment to governments, who established reserves and managed stations for their protection and sustenance. From the beginning, and perhaps as justification for the establishment of segregated institutions for Aboriginal inmates, the authorities depicted these stations as training institutions that would transform the ‘natives’, stripping them of their culture, seen as being heathen, primitive, ‘stone-age’ and backward. They were to become more acceptable, as well as useful, to the dominant Australian society. The imposition of western schooling played a significant role in this stratagem. The following provides a brief introduction to the long period of institutionalization and transformation wrought by church and government.

Murrin Bridge, central-western NSW, was founded as an Aboriginal station in 1949 when the residents were transferred from the reserve at Menindee, over 300 kilometres to the west. The people previously had lived in the government settlement at Carowra Tank, being transported to Menindee in 1934 when the tank ran dry. The reserve at Menindee was also known as ‘the mission’ because of the involvement there of Roman Catholic Sacred Heart missionaries. Murrin Bridge, although established and managed as a government Aboriginal Station, has always been known by Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in the region as ‘the mission’. The leaders of the community today prefer it to be termed ‘an Aboriginal community’, perhaps in response to the occasional sneering, heavily accented, comments from outside Koories, such as, “Eh, you from mission, bud?” They imply that the ‘mission mob’ is backward, uses Aboriginal English, is afraid of the outside world and lacks sophistication. Over the years many comments from townspeople, from children to professional and leaders, have reinforced the negative, critical stereotype.

The Menindee settlement was a disaster for the residents, particularly during the economic depression years of the 1930s. It became an acute political embarrassment for the New South Wales government; consequently, an alternative settlement was sought. On 15 June 1945, the Chief Secretary announced that a model Aboriginal settlement was to be built at Murrin Bridge, with accommodation for 300 Aborigines, including a church, school, recreation area, and 500 hectares for agricultural development. It was to be ‘a model agricultural village’.

The chosen location was advantageous for those who had maximum influence on the decisions of government, namely local white townsmen and landholders, as well as the administrators and interested whites on the Aborigines Welfare Board. Being placed beside the Lachlan River, a permanent source of water, the settlement avoided the water shortages that had bedevilled the former stations to the west; it was