BOOK REVIEWS

A Clergyman's Undoing

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THE FORREST RIVER MASSACRES

By Neville Green
(Fremantle Arts Centre Press pp 254 $19.95)

The following address was given by the Most Reverend Dr PF Carnley, Archbishop of Perth, at the official launch of Neville Green's book The Forrest River Massacres. *The launch was held at the Fremantle Arts Centre on 19 January 1995.*

It is a very great pleasure to have been asked to launch Neville Green's book. I guess I stand here to perform this task primarily because of the historical connection of the Anglican Church with the Forrest River, an association that goes back to the very first attempt to establish a mission there in 1898 by a group led by Harold Hale, the son of the first bishop of Perth.

Indeed, the mission, which provides the geographical focus and the immediate social context for the story of the massacres, also threw up the central character of the story in the person of the missionary priest, Ernest Gribble, its superintendent in 1926, and the unwavering protagonist of the cause of justice, about whom I shall say something in a moment.

Behind him stood the Australian Board of Missions with its headquarters in Sydney and local Western Australian committees, and the institutional structures of the Anglican Church of the Province of Western Australia, which inevitably drew one of my predecessors, Archbishop COL Riley into the drama, if at the edges.

It was Riley who, after a visit to the north of the State in 1896, publicly condemned what he described as 'the harsh indenture system of white employers, the absence of medical facilities on the reserves and the ill-defined police regulations which permitted natives to be shot wantonly in the interests of self-defence'.

This sounds, as in an overture, the sinister chords, with sad foreboding and concern, that were to be heard loud and clear in and through the anguish of the tragedy to come.

Despite the fact that Riley's implicit criticism of police and pastoralists is said to have angered Sir John Forrest, the State premier at the time, and the pastoralist-dominated parliament, he pressed on and launched an appeal for an Aboriginal mission at his synod of that year. That was what led to the involvement of the Australian Board of Missions and eventually to the initial attempt to establish the Forrest River Mission by Harold Hale in 1898.

Clearly, Neville Green's story is therefore significant to me because it is part of the story of the Anglican Church in this State. But, apart from this institutional connection with the Forrest River Mission, it is all the more meaningful for me personally to be involved in the launch of Neville's book because of my own very vivid memories of the place.

I have been to the Forrest River Mission — now known as Oombulgurri — on two occasions. On the first visit in the early 1980s I flew out from Wyndham and was left more or less to my own resources overnight. I slept in a caravan that was at the time unused for its normal welfare-related purpose. It was certainly very hot. One of my very vivid impressions was the distinctive stoccato beeping sound rather than chirping of flocks of zebra finches, flying in thick clouds, whirling close to the ground and just overhead and alighting for a brief pause amongst the bushes before taking off again in the early morning sunlight.

The other visual image that stays with me of the raw beauty of Oombulgurri is that of the avenue of splendid Boab trees with their bottle-shaped trunks lining what I suppose we might call Oombulgurri's main street. I have a feeling that they were planted by my recently deceased friend, John Best, who was for a time the priest superintendent and whose widow, Molly, is with us this evening.

On my second, more recent visit, I attempted the task of actually trying to preach in the Church of St Michael and All Angels on the patronal festival. I remember well talking about Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles as the nearest-to-hand teaching aid for focusing on the martial image of St Michael with shield and sword and his angels wheeling through the air, as it were, to assist the cause of good against evil.

More importantly, I well remember on one of these visits (I cannot remember precisely which), as I sat with a group of Aborigines, that we talked about the tall cast-iron cross and pile of stones, the memorial to those who died in the massacres, up on the jump-up, a little ridge running along the side of the settlement. But my only clear memory of exactly what was said was that some women commented that on some nights from up on the jump-up they could still hear the wailing and the crying of the women and children.

One does not speak easily of the dead with Aboriginal people and whether the real or imagined wailing and crying was of mourners or victims facing their end, I did not ask. I simply filed this comment away with the image of the cross made of water pipe and a few other fragments of the story of the massacres of the 1920s that I sensed nobody particularly wanted to talk about ... or else it was expected that everyone already knew enough about it not to need to be told more.

These personal images of Oombulgurri, the place, spring vividly to life as I read Neville's absolutely absorbing book. And it is certainly good now to have such a well documented and well written account of the whole terrible story so as to be able to piece together the fragments in the form of a coherent historical narrative, structured as it is by a clear thesis as to what happened and who was responsible.

Neville told me the other day that he had originally been trained in ancient history and that he learned from the Roman historian, Polybius, that in order to write the history of an event one must visit the scene and then place the incident in its broader historical context. In order to grasp and understand how it happened and why it happened, one must know its broader antecedents; and to assess its significance in the overall course of things one must have some acquaintance with its aftermath. Just to recount the bare facts of the event alone is not enough.

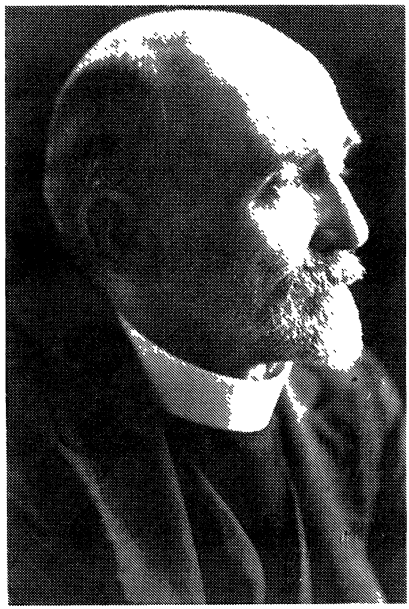
Neville's interest in the massacres of 1926 was triggered by direct acquaintance with the place when he was actually teaching at the mission school in 1967, near the end of one phase of its life, and when he had access to the local journals. *The Forrest River Massacres* is thus the outcome of nearly 30 years of research and historical reflection; indeed, it is the work of a lifetime.

And his placing of the incidents of the massacres in the broader historical context of the often strained relationships of the Kimberley pastoralists and the traditional Aboriginal inhabitants in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries certainly helps us to understand how the tragedy of 1926 came about.

On one hand, we have traditional hunter-gatherer people traversing land over which their forebears had roamed for centuries in search of food and, on the other, pastoralists, newly arrived on the same land, and putting temptation of what I would think would be an irresistible kind in front of them, in the form of heads of beef as a succulent alternative to kangaroo. The clash was inevitable, the hunger of the Aborigines and the anger of the pastoralists understandable; and equally understandable, I think, given our flawed human nature, was the development of the whole ensuing culture of 'teaching the culprits a lesson' that was generated amongst pastoralists and police and that tragically led to the widespread brutalising of Aboriginal people.

Surely we have here all the unavoidable inevitability of the forces of a Greek tragedy. Even those who eventually came to be accused were in large part victims of historical circumstance and of deeper forces than their immediate awareness.

Then we have the figure of Ernest Gribble with the deep psychological scar left by having seen his father, John Brown Gribble, humiliated and driven out of the Gascoyne in 1885 at the climax of an earlier episode of essentially the same conflict, after his father had made himself unpopular by protesting at atrocities committed against Aborigines.



Gribble: 'terrier-like'

Depending on where our own fundamental commitments lie, we may well ask whether it was providence or fate that should place in the position of protector of the Aborigines one who was so spiritually identified with the Aboriginal people and at the same time so uncompromising in his commitment to the pursuit of justice. For Gribble was prone to be terrier-like and even obsessive about his responsibilities of protection, so that he pursued justice when most would opt for a quieter life.

In this latter category (I regret to say) we must include Archbishop Riley himself who, when he was first informed by Gribble of the alleged massacres, froze in benign inactivity

as he no doubt processed the anxiety relating to whether or not the story could possibly be true. And in the end, when the magistrate at the preliminary hearing judged the evidence available to be insufficient to place those accused on trial before a jury, Riley found himself pouring oil on troubled waters, pointing out that given the court's finding there was little more that the government could reasonably do, while Gribble's continued uncompromising stirring fed public outrage.

By this time the controversy over the massacres had focused the spotlight on Gribble the missionary, and his missionary methods, which were beginning to cause some unease. He was clearly a man of his time in the sense that he did not, for example, question the appropriateness of separating children from parents in a way that today we would regard as unacceptable, though it must be said that in 1926 it was of course not so unusual but fairly normal even amongst the strict boarding school culture of the English aristocracy to separate children from their parents for their education.

Gribble was clearly also a stern disciplinarian who does not seem to have questioned the propriety of using the strap if necessary, a quality which does not sit comfortably with our contemporary dislike of corporal punishment. His insistence that Aboriginal people should best live in separation from the temptations of European society does not seem quite congruent with the unwitting destruction of Aboriginal culture by his own insistent implementation of his own vision of the model mission community. His methods of resolving disputes and handling offences as a justice of the peace with the advice of a panel of Aboriginal elders seems enlightened, but hard to marry with the running-up of the Union Jack on Sundays, as much a signal that the mission was an outpost of empire as that Sunday was a special day.

It all makes for the remnant image of a missionary of the nineteenth century living on into the twentieth, working very successfully according to his own lights, but a living paradigm of paternalism, who did not hesitate to replace Aboriginal culture with an imported and somewhat artificially created alternative. But who can, from the perspective of the present, with our current perception of what is in terms of professional behaviour right and proper, assess the work of one who belonged to an age whose value system is not ours?

Certainly Gribble comes across as a very unusual figure, hardly the stereotype of a contemporary clergyman, and *The Forrest River Massacres* is without doubt an enthralling story. My guess is that this book will be a best seller. It is bound to be controversial, if only because of the unresolved and unsatisfactory outcome of the original police investigation, which left everybody quite certain that a terrible massacre had occurred but without the final conviction of any perpetrator of the crime.

The historian has to make a judgment that the courts at the time were unable to make. There are already indications that some may argue that a massacre never occurred. For this reason alone one senses that Neville Green's book will re-kindle a debate rather than finish it. But no history is ever the final word; evidence has constantly to be assessed and re-assessed and everybody stands on the shoulders of those who have gone before so as to see a little further. What is clear is that Neville Green's painstaking work is bound to become the authoritative basis for all continuing discussion. We congratulate him and thank him for it.

I have great pleasure in launching it. May it sell well and be widely read. And may we all be sobered by it and learn from it, not only something about the strange

events of 1926 at the Forrest River, but something for the betterment of our humanity and of our life together with the Aboriginal people of this land in the years to come.

+PETER PERTH.

Duty Rules — OK?

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THE PRINCIPLE OF DUTY

By David Selbourne
(Sinclair-Stevenson pp 288 $39.95)

Few books on political philosophy can have enjoyed as sensational and highly publicised a launch as David Selbourne's *The Principle of Duty*. In London, *The Times* graced the occasion with two leading articles, three supporting feature articles and a two-day serialisation of the book. In addition, together with Dillons Bookstore, *The Times* organised and co-hosted the official launch of the book before an audience of 450 distinguished guests at the London School of Economics on 14 June 1994.

Though *The Times* was unstinting in its praise for the book, reviewers in other journals were far less ecstatic. However, all paid tribute to Selbourne for having put the question of *duty* (and service), as opposed to rights and liberties, back on the political and moral agenda. Beyond this, opinion was divided.

One of the principal criticisms made of *The Principle of Duty* by reviewers in England was that it is badly argued and does not merit the description of 'political philosophy', given to it by Selbourne (p 2). For example, Noel Malcolm, who reviewed the book for the *Sunday Telegraph* (12 June 1994), thought that the book lacked the intellectual rigour and depth of knowledge which are the hallmarks of true philosophy. Likewise, John Gray, writing in the *Times Literary Supplement* (23 September 1994), felt that the book was more of 'a melange of idiosyncratic opinions and judgements' than a serious philosophical tract.

Fair comment?

These criticisms are deserved, but they should not be allowed to obscure the fact that the book carries an important and timely message which can be summarised as follows. (1) An ever increasing number of people are becoming wholly absorbed in their own selfish interests and pursuits and are ignoring their obligations to their fellow citizens and the state as a whole. (2) The state has shown itself unwilling, or powerless, to combat this problem. (3) The impotence of the state, in the face of the growing selfishness of its citizens, has led to a precipitous decline in moral and social standards which, if unchecked, may threaten the existence of the state itself. (Selbourne refers to this process as 'civic disaggregation'.)

It is an interesting thesis, and one which is argued with skill and vigour; but