
REVIEW ESSAY

Still colonising: The limits of the liberal text in the historiography of Aboriginal education

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Clean clad and courteous: A history of Aboriginal education in New South Wales; Documents in the history of Aboriginal education in New South Wales, by J.J. Fletcher, 1989, Sydney: The author, 45 Bibby Street, Carlton, NSW 2218, Australia, 375pp and 272pp.

Introduction

Clean Clad and Courteous, along with its companion volume of documents, marks a significant watershed in the history of Aboriginal education. Up until the publication of these books there has been no comprehensive account of schooling for Aborigines in any Australian state. Yet, as the author so succinctly argues in the Preface to the main volume, the school has been used over the past two centuries by white communities to deal with 'the Aboriginal problem'. More specifically the author suggests that 'schools have been used in the cause of pacification, christianisation and anglo-europeanisation to protect white interests'.¹ Thus an account which places education at the centre of Aboriginal history is long overdue.

Such an account is not, however, quite what Fletcher offers in these books. Instead he places policies on Aborigines at the centre of educational history. In so doing this research provides substantive evidence that schools have systematically and intentionally been used by anglo-europeans to discriminate against Aborigines. This a necessary and important argument which is also long overdue. Yet by focusing on policies on Aboriginal education rather than placing education at the centre of Aboriginal history, this research has some important limitations. In this review essay I want to explore these insights and limitations within the context of the theoretical tradition of *liberalism* which so clearly informs Fletcher's research.

Placing policies on Aborigines at the centre of educational history

The account provided by Fletcher represents an overwhelming body of research. This research began when Fletcher was appointed historian to the New South Wales Department of Education and he 'began noticing evidence of discrimination against Aborigines in historical documents'. This cohered into a post-graduate thesis in the late 1970s, and finally emerged as the more comprehensive account available in these two books.²

As this suggests, the central theme of both books is how schooling has systematically discriminated against Aborigines in New South Wales. This theme is developed in the main volume - *Clean, Clad and Courteous* - through a discussion on four different patterns of policy formulation which are discernible in discrete periods across the past two hundred years.

According to Fletcher the framework of the first pattern was established through the Native Institution in 1814, and continued through various Missions and policy recommendations to the 1860s. Essential elements of this pattern consisted of an attempt to anglo-europeanise through

conversion to christianity, the removal of children from parents to achieve this, and the dismal failure of these attempts.

During the 1870s a new pattern began to emerge. The basic elements of this new pattern were a desire by Aborigines for integration (evident, according to Fletcher, through the enrolment of "a significant number" of Aboriginal children in schools), and a desire by white communities for the segregation of Aborigines. By alternating chapters on the policy formulation process within and between the Department of Education and the Aborigines Protection Board, Fletcher illustrates how segregation became the preferred government path. Across these chapters a great deal of attention is given to Education Department policies which emerged around the turn of the twentieth century. Essentially these policies excluded Aboriginal children from state schools on the demand of white communities (unless the children were 'clean, clad and courteous'), and led to the establishment of a separate and segregated system of Aboriginal schools.

By the 1930s another pattern began to emerge, largely - it is suggested - because of increasing numbers of Aborigines throughout the state in general, and the increasing number on government reserves in particular. This new pattern involved the construction of a policy of education for assimilation, which was to be achieved mainly by dismantling the segregated system. For various reasons the government found implementing this policy to be fraught with difficulties. Consequently desegregation was not actually achieved until the 1960s.

After de-segregation was in place, however, increasing evidence that the 'regular' school system was failing Aboriginal children was brought to light. Hence in the 1980s another pattern emerged, this time through a range of new legislation, organisations and policy which sought to promote positive discrimination in education for Aborigines.

Throughout this substantial account the author provides overwhelming and continuing evidence of systematic discrimination against Aboriginal children in the New South Wales school system. This evidence includes the limited curriculum available in the segregated Aboriginal School system, the appointment of unqualified teachers to these schools, the sub-standard conditions of school buildings, the channelling of Aboriginal children into unskilled labour, the extreme underrepresentation of Aboriginal children in secondary and tertiary education, and (white) beliefs about the ineducability of Aborigines.

None of this is particularly new or startling to those involved with Aboriginal education. What is both new and valuable, however, is the careful collation of a vast range of official documents related to education which cover two centuries of Australian history, the development of a systematic argument about the history of Aboriginal education, and the contextualisation of this argument and evidence within broader social policy on Aborigines.

Both the argument and evidence that are developed in the main volume are supplemented by the companion volume of documents. On its own this collection is a major feat of research. The author has drawn together and reproduced excerpts from 245 sources - including government reports, gazettes, journals, pamphlets, books, articles, personal correspondence, official memoranda, inspector's reports, newspapers, minutes of meetings, and parliamentary debates. A great deal of this material has never been published before, and will therefore provide an extremely useful resource for anyone interested in the history of Aboriginal education. While the documents have been arranged to follow the structure of the main volume, the detailed commentary throughout each chapter is designed so that the book can stand alone.

There can be no doubt that these two volumes make a significant contribution to our collective understanding of the history of Aboriginal education, and that they will form an indispensable resource for teaching in the area. Together they also begin to illustrate the crucial role education was intended to play in the process of colonisation in New South Wales, and point to the importance of structural racism as part of this process.

Because of the significant contribution these volumes make to the field, it is imperative that we also be aware of their limitations. In the remainder of this essay I want to explore how some of the major insights and limitations of Fletcher's research have been shaped by the theoretical tradition in which he has written these texts. This theoretical tradition is liberalism. Liberalism was very influential in the history of education up to the 1970s. Since this time, studies informed by other social theories have offered challenges to the central tenets of liberal histories, and to the images of education constructed through these tenets.³ As none of these 'revisionist' challenges have emerged specifically around indigenous histories of education, Fletcher's research further provides an excellent vehicle for exploring the boundaries of liberalism in relation to indigenous history.

Clean, clad and courteous as a liberal text

At the outset it is useful to distinguish between liberalism as a political ideology and liberalism as a theoretical tradition with the field of history. When historians refer to liberal historiography they invoke particular meanings about a specific tradition that is not translatable immediately into its political ideological form.⁴

Generally speaking, liberal historiography can be typified by two central characteristics: its teleological nature and its claim of objectivity. The teleological nature of liberal histories owes much to the Sociological theory of structuralism, whereas its claim to objectivity derives from the epistemological tradition of empiricism.

Like structuralist theories, liberal histories are teleological in that they tend to construe current educational practices as both inevitable historical developments and as the pinnacle of progress. In this way liberal histories typically explain past educational practices as either an absence of current practice or the rudimentary beginnings and development of contemporary practice. Where the historical explanation is in terms of an absence of current practice, absence is sometimes accounted for through the oversight, lack of understanding, or plain mismanagement of historical actors. Absence can also be construed as the natural consequence of a less sophisticated and less complex society. Where the historical explanation is in terms of the beginnings of contemporary practice, development is sometimes seen as resulting from the insight and influence of charismatic individuals. Glimmerings of contemporary practice can also be accounted for as the natural consequence of society becoming more complex and sophisticated. It is not unusual to find both sorts of explanations operating together in the one historical account.⁵

The claim to objectivity operates alongside this teleological nature. Basically this claim stems from an empiricist-positivist view of knowledge, which holds that there is one truth (and only one truth) and that it is possible to reveal this truth if information is gathered and presented in a neutral way. Historians working within this model tend to assume that what they are doing is simply recording the past in an unproblematic way. As Olssen argues, rather than perceiving their task as one of selecting and interpreting information to construct a *particular* story, liberal historians see themselves as neutral observers who are narrating history 'as it really happened'.⁶

Both of these characteristics lend themselves to a focus within liberal histories on 'the minutiae of educational practice. Such histories emphasise, for example, who was in an authoritative position at a given time and describe what curricular, legislative and other changes they wrought. Or they are careful to detail the development of (what they see) as more complex systems of education over time. In this way liberal histories are also distinguishable by their incessant litany of 'acts and facts'. Consequently liberal historiography tends to be concerned more with description than it is with theoretical formulation.

Although all liberal histories share these central characteristics to greater or lesser degrees, they are assembled in different ways across two broadly different types of accounts in the history of Australian education. Each of these two types can be seen as deriving from the 'political' ideology of liberalism which has shaped the way people think about and understand the world in Western

countries for each is constructed through one of several essential themes which constitute the core of liberalism as a post-reformation ideology.⁷ In brief the two themes which inform the two types of liberal histories I want to distinguish between here are individualism and a neutral state. What makes these two types of accounts liberal is not so much that they discuss individuals or the state, but that they take individualism and this view of the state *for granted*. Hence the theoretical underpinnings of liberal histories are frequently implicit rather than explicit, and it is left to the reader to ascertain their theoretical stance from the way in which discussion ensues. The key to identifying each type lays with the primary focus of the historical account.

One type of liberal history centres on *the individual as the key agent in historical change*. This type of account tends to focus on individuals - usually men - in positions of authority who, through the force (or lack of) their own personality, influence (or fail to influence) education policy to bring about (or fail to bring about) change. This focus on the individual is strengthened by the broader assumption that structural change, such as state involvement in schooling, is inevitable as society becomes more complex and sophisticated. In this way there is no need to search for explanations for change at the structural level, and focusing on the authoritative individual as the key agent in historical change thus has some logic. Spaul has identified a strong focus on individuals within Australian historiography, suggesting that the 'biographical' tradition is one of its dominant motifs. Feminist historians have less kindly but perhaps more perceptively identified this type of historiography as 'great men history'.⁸

The other type of liberal account focuses on *the role of a neutral government in education*. Bannister suggests that this is *the* dominant motif in Australian historiography of education. She further indicates that this type of account commonly talks about the government as the key actor in educational history, has the government school as its focus, conflates education with schooling, and assumes state involvement in education is inevitable and impartial.⁹ By the latter she means that the government is depicted in liberal historiography as a passive or neutral arbitrator of conflict. This also means that conflict is depicted as occurring outside the government sphere, and that government is therefore seen as a site where external conflicts are mediated and resolved. Hence if the government supports one group, or one particular interest, this is the natural result of government acting as a mediator of conflict.

Taking Bannister's argument one step further we can see that liberal histories which are organised around the government motif would also have a tendency to emphasise consensus rather than conflict. In other words, they would see educational change as the result of the government gaining consensus on issues rather than the state an arena where power struggles are played out, supported, and shaped. Where power is discussed in any type of liberal history, it is more in terms of individuals attempting to have their views taken into account (sometimes within the neutral government arena) or as a neutral government whose task is to find compromises between different interests, groups, or individuals.

Each of these approaches are evident in the historiography of Aboriginal education. The 'great men' or individual variety, for example, can be found in the various works of Barry Bridges. These works are basically an exercise in piecing together information gleaned from written documents in order to describe who established the Native Institution at Parramatta and how it operated. They suggest that missionary Shelley established the Institution with the support of Governor Macquarie, and, consistent with this focus, explain the failure of the Institution largely in terms of Shelley's untimely death. Two other factors are also pointed to in accounting for the failure of the Institution: that the teachers were unable to implement the intended curriculum, and that compulsory education was never introduced.¹⁰

Bridges' research can be characterised as liberal for several reasons. First, it is concerned largely with bringing previously unknown archival material to light, and linking this material together in a descriptive way. Second, it draws on teleological explanations in order to go beyond the statements found in the archival material (eg we have compulsory education now, so the Institution failed

because of the lack of compulsory education then). Third, it accounts for educational change as the result of men of vision being in the right place at the right time. The distinct impression we are left with after reading Bridges' research is that if missionary Shelley had not been around at that time, and if he had not succeeded in gaining the support of Governor Macquarie, then the Institution would never have been established. (If we extrapolate this argument to a later date, we would have to account for the emergence of the segregated system of Aboriginal schooling throughout Australia in the late nineteenth century as the result of either one great visionary who convinced others they should do the same, or the highly unlikely historical coincidence of having a number of great visionaries around in the same country at the same time.)

Finally, and most importantly in terms of this discussion, Bridges' research appears to be concerned ultimately with telling the story of the Native Institution 'as it really happened'. Because he draws only on archival material left by those who established the Institution we are therefore presented with their side of the story as the only story. In so doing, Bridges uncritically replicates the arguments found in the historical documents - documents that were left by those who were not Aboriginal and who were convinced that Aborigines needed 'civilising'. Hence Bridges never questions that Aborigines required 'civilising'. Instead he simply reproduces the arguments of those who believed they did.

The gross problems with the individual version of liberal history are illustrated quite nicely through Jim Fletcher's more recent research. Fletcher does not reduce the dynamics of historical change to great men of vision. Instead he argues that the segregated system of Aboriginal schools emerged because of agitation by white communities to have Aboriginal children excluded from state schools; agitation that the government was forced to respond to. Through this argument Fletcher not only shifts our attention from 'great men' explanations, but points us towards broader social movements and structures by suggesting that schooling became a form of institutional racism. In this way Fletcher also deliberately seeks to critically examine the assumption that schools sought to anglo-europeanise Aborigines and that this was necessarily a good thing. In this sense Fletcher's argument is revisionist, in that it does not take the 'civilising' project for granted and it does not have the authoritative individual at its core.

Yet if we look more closely at Fletcher's theoretical framework we can characterise it as that variety of liberal historiography which focuses on the neutral state, for three reasons. In the first instance, Fletcher constructs the history of Aboriginal education as a story of gradual progress towards improved policies, structures and attitudes. Along these lines the history of nineteenth century education is largely a story about lack of government commitment to providing the same opportunities for Aboriginal children as for non-Aboriginal children. It is only in the early twentieth century that the government began to systematically provide schooling for Aboriginal children; schooling that was demonstrably inferior on all counts from that offered to non-Aboriginal children. It was, moreover, only during the late twentieth century that the government moved towards dismantling this inferior system of schooling and allowing Aboriginal children access to the same type of schooling as non-Aboriginal children. While the movement is therefore one of bad to worse then improvement, and while it is noted that problems still remain, the overall picture is nonetheless one of a gradual movement towards enlightenment and progress by policymakers.

In the second instance, the government is not only depicted as the key agent in historical change but, more importantly, it is construed as a neutral vehicle in this process. Fletcher argues that the outcome of Department of Education policies formulated in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was institutional racism - an outcome which is indisputable. At first glance this suggests that the government did *not* act as a neutral arbitrator of external social conflict. Yet institutional racism is explained by Fletcher as the result of external pressures being brought to bear on the government and which led to the Department formulating such policies. In the critical period of the late nineteenth century this is seen largely as pressure exerted by various non-Aboriginal groups and communities on the government. Consequently in Fletcher's account the state remains

an 'empty' or neutral vessel which simply reflects the interests of whichever group can agitate most successfully for change.

Thirdly, Fletcher's research works from an understanding of 'equity' which has been identified as a twentieth century version of post-Reformation liberal ideology. In short, this version of liberalism posits equity in terms of equal access to the 'regular' government school.¹¹ In this vein the problem becomes the way in which Aboriginal children are treated differently from non-Aboriginal children as a result of government policy, and how this functions to provide Aboriginal children with inferior schooling. The solution is therefore to change policies so that Aboriginal children are provided with equal access to the 'regular' state school. This view of equity also provides Fletcher's measure of movement away from and towards enlightenment. For him, institutional racism begins at the point when Aboriginal children are excluded from the government school and wanes when the structural barriers constructed in this earlier process are gradually removed.

Seen in the context of the foregoing points, Fletcher's research is revisionist to the extent that it represents a more critical and sophisticated version of liberalism than the individualistic variety. Through its more critical framework it poses two important challenges to the version of liberalism found in Bridges' research. Firstly, it points to the significance of structural action/effects and thus challenges the view that history is created (and changed) by the authoritative individual. Secondly, it systematically questions the intention and effects of anglo-european attempts to colonise Aboriginal children through schooling. On the latter count in particular Fletcher appears to work from the same sort of concerns as the liberal humanitarians, or liberal reformers, of the early to mid-nineteenth century, who challenged slavery as the unjust oppression of particular groups of human beings. As such, Fletcher's variation of liberal historiography on Aboriginal education could be called *humanitarian liberalism*. It is clearly distinguishable from Bridges' *fundamentalist liberalism*, which can be deemed 'fundamentalist' because it assumes that Aborigines required 'civilising'.

Despite the more critical approach of the humanitarian liberal text, *Clean, Clad and Courteous* has a number of important limitations. The most curious limitation is that the book fails to develop its stated aim of illustrating how schools acted to protect white interests. This remains implicit throughout while instead, both the main volume and its documentary supplement emphasise how schools have discriminated against Aborigines. Another important limitation is a complete absence of discussion on those government policies formulated at the turn of the twentieth century (and which continued to operate until the 1960s) which explicitly sought to remove Aboriginal children from their families and communities, and deployed schools as part of this process.¹²

Each of these limitations are linked to another more crucial problem; one that is shared equally by both the individualistic and neutral state versions of liberal historiography in general, and by the fundamentalist and humanitarian versions of Aboriginal historiography in particular. In short this is that *liberal historiography ignores the issue of Aboriginal agency*. In Bridges' approach the authoritative non-Aboriginal individual is the key dynamic in historical change, whereas in Fletcher's approach it is the government. Neither take into account the fact that Aboriginal people had their own world views and that they too were integral actors in the historical process of (re)formulating 'Aboriginal schooling'. *By ignoring the issue of Aboriginal agency, these texts not only provide distorted historical accounts but they represent Aboriginal people in some very problematic ways.*

Distorting the historical account by ignoring Aboriginal agency: The politics of representation in the liberal text

The way in which liberal histories distort the historical account by ignoring Aboriginal agency is most obvious in the fundamentalist liberal version found in Bridges' research. These works not only focus on the views and behaviours of early colonial anglo-european 'authorities', but repeat their views uncritically. Hence Bridges takes central issues - like 'Aborigines were uncivilised' and that what Shelley and Macquarie intended to do through the Native Institution was 'a good thing' - for

granted. In so doing he reinforces the views expressed by these colonial administrators that Aborigines were indeed 'savages' and that they themselves were acting only through benevolent and enlightened concern. In this context Bridges interprets what could well have been Aboriginal reluctance to leave their children at the Native Institution as a lamentable impediment to the visionary project of 'raising the savages from their state of barbarism'.¹³

By failing to even consider that Aboriginal communities around the Sydney area may have had their own reasons for both using and failing to use the Native Institution, Bridges represents Aborigines as having no rationale for acting in the ways they did - except, of course, to incidentally impede anglo-european visions. This further implies very strongly that Aborigines were too ignorant to realise the benefits that schooling would bring to them. At a more basic level, however, this type of account depicts Aborigines as being passive pawns in history, as having no part to play in historical processes. It also simultaneously indicates that it is anglo-european people who have the power, insight, and right to act upon the world.

Thus this type of interpretation derives from *and* reinforces the assumption that Aborigines required anglo-europeanising, and does so in several different ways. By ignoring Aboriginal agency, the fundamentalist version of liberal historiography clearly continues the very project of colonisation that it describes in its histories of Aboriginal schooling.

The humanitarian variation of liberalism also continues the project of colonisation by ignoring the issue of Aboriginal agency, but does so in more subtle and complex ways. In the Preface to the main volume of his two companion books, Fletcher notes that his focus is on white communities and government policy rather than on Aborigines themselves.¹⁴ While at one level this is an entirely justifiable way of limiting and thus focusing a research project, at another level it denies Aboriginal agency just as decisively as the fundamental liberal text. The result of this systematic marginalisation of Aboriginal agency is a historical account in which Aborigines are depicted as the objects of government policy. Ultimately this positions Aborigines as a group that non-Aboriginal people need to act on behalf of.

I am by no means suggesting that this is deliberate in *Clean, Clad and Courteous*. Indeed, Fletcher sees his research as the beginning of research on race relations which portrays Aborigines more sympathetically, and he even talks in the final chapter about policies of self-determination. Yet even policies of self-determination are discussed as emerging from and through government (ie non-Aboriginal) agencies.¹⁵ Hence the upshot of setting Aboriginal agency aside rather than making it central to the research project is a version of history which derives from *and* feeds back into an argument which first found expression in the early colonial period - the argument that Aboriginal people are incapable of managing their own lives and that non-Aboriginal people therefore need to do it for them.

By rendering Aboriginal agency a non-issue the humanitarian liberal account also marginalises Aboriginal perceptions just as surely as fundamental liberalism. This is not to say that *Clean, Clad and Courteous* provides no indication of Aboriginal thoughts on policy, for it does. In particular it provides the occasional glimpse of Aboriginal voices objecting to the late nineteenth century policy of excluding Aboriginal children from state schools, as well as objections to the inferior standard of schooling that was offered to Aboriginal children thereafter. However, by inserting oppositional voices around these issues, Fletcher constructs a congruence of views between Aboriginal people and the state about what was (and is) needed from schooling.¹⁶

Fletcher reinforces this congruence of views throughout the text in two ways. One way is by constantly pointing to the number of Aboriginal children enrolled at various schools as evidence of Aboriginal parents' desire not only to have their children at school, but to become 'integrated' into anglo-european society. Given the opposition voiced by some parents to the expulsion of their children from school, the argument that some Aboriginal parents did want their children to attend anglo-european schools is tenable. It does not, however, automatically follow that this meant these Aboriginal people wanted to be 'integrated'. Yet Fletcher extrapolates precisely this generalisation

from the statistics on numbers of Aboriginal children enrolled at school without any supporting evidence at all.

If Aboriginal agency was considered, other interpretations of these statistics are entirely possible. Some children, for example, may have been forced to enrol at school by virtue of living on a government reserve. Some may have attended, but for their own particular reasons - such as fluency in the English language in order to gain waged work or more control over waged work. It might also have been the case that some parents did send their children to school with an eye towards some form of 'integration', yet this does not mean that these particular Aboriginal people and anglo-europeans meant the same thing by integration. For anglo-europeans, assimilationist policies in their various guises have sought to transform Aborigines into anglo-europeans. For Aboriginal people it may have been more a case of utilising schooling in order to gain more control over the way they would interact with anglo-european society. Yet the dubious explanation Fletcher offers to account for the presence of Aboriginal children in schools fails to recognise that Aboriginal people undoubtedly acted from their own perceptions and for their own purposes. Instead it obscures the theoretical need to explore Aboriginal views by interpreting statistics as evidence that Aborigines shared the same agenda regarding schooling as anglo-europeans.

The other way Fletcher reinforces a congruence of views between Aboriginal parents and government agencies is by interpreting the much greater number of Aboriginal children who were *not* at school as evidence of the state's lack of commitment to their education. It is here that the absence of Aboriginal agency is most telling. A closer examination of the statistics provided by Fletcher indicates that up until the early twentieth century there were always fewer Aboriginal children at school than there were out of school. Unlike statistics on non-Aboriginal children, this balance only shifted once a degree of compulsion was introduced (through the establishment of state schools on Reserves).¹⁷

This strongly suggests that around the turn of the twentieth century at least, the majority of Aboriginal people were not interested in anglo-european schooling at all. The challenge remains for historians to ascertain possible reasons for this. Yet by suggesting that low Aboriginal enrolment at school was the result of government indifference, Fletcher again conceals even the need to consider such points.

By framing Aboriginal interaction with anglo-european forms of schooling in these two related ways, the text further implies that *every* Aboriginal adult wanted for their children the particular forms of schooling that were made available by anglo-europeans. Moreover, the text implies that this is what every Aboriginal adult had wanted since the time of initial invasion.

This framing of a broad consensus between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people not only silences the very need to examine the complexities of Aboriginal views and actions, but it ignores a great deal of historical research which does examine Aboriginal views. Indeed, the consensus in Fletcher's text stands in stark contrast to evidence offered in other research which has systematically included Aboriginal agency. Henry Reynolds, for example, argues that in the early colonial period Aboriginal people in the Sydney area had a keen awareness of the intention of invaders to assimilate them into the ranks of the unskilled working class through time-labour discipline - and that they rejected this.¹⁸ Because time-labour discipline, as an avenue into unskilled labour, was central to the project of 'civilisation' in the Native Institution, it is possible that Aboriginal rejection of both the concept of British time-labour and the intention to re-create them as lower working class anglo-europeans had a great deal to do with the failure of the Institution.¹⁹ Similarly, Michael Christie provides concrete evidence for the mid-nineteenth century, and Peter Read for the late nineteenth century, that some Aboriginal elders were keenly aware of the intended role of schooling in challenging and fragmenting Aboriginal knowledge - and that this was dealt with by attempting to prevent their children and grandchildren from attending school.²⁰

These examples illustrate that some of the issues involved in self-determination (such as the need to preserve Aboriginal cultural identity) existed long before they emerged in government

policies of the late twentieth century. They also illustrate that the source of these issues have been Aboriginal people themselves, not enlightened state agencies as Fletcher so glibly suggests. More importantly, these examples suggest that by conflating Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal views on schooling, Fletcher's humanitarian liberal approach silences issues which Aboriginal people have consistently raised as critical in their own versions of history. By silencing these issues, the liberal text ignores two areas which Aboriginal people have consistently pointed to as central to their own histories, and which have implications for histories of education. One is that the nineteenth century - at least for those on the east coast of Australia - is bitterly recalled as 'the killing times'. What was at stake for Aboriginal communities throughout much of the nineteenth century was how to survive the havoc wrought by the savage onslaught of anglo-european guns, disease, and dispossession. The other is that by the turn of the century the issues centred around surviving dispossession in the face of equally savage government policies which intended to place Aborigines under constant surveillance and fragment their communities, and which used schooling as an important instrument for implementing child removal policies as part of this broader process.²¹

By ignoring these issues, the liberal humanitarian text grossly distorts the historical account. Even a cursory comparison of the issues discussed by Fletcher and those raised by Aboriginal people themselves indicates that Aboriginal views on what was important throughout the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century were by no means as congruent with state views as Fletcher suggests. Rather, they indicate that we should probably understand the nineteenth century as a period where the views of Aboriginal communities and the state tended more towards sharp differences on the value of schooling. This suggests that to incorporate Aboriginal agency more centrally into the historical account we would necessarily have to emphasise conflicting views on schooling. In order to do this we would have to venture into the terrain of struggle; struggle between an indigenous people who sought to maintain their own communities and an invading group who intended to colonise.

Relocating the history of Aboriginal education onto the terrain of struggle would provide the theoretical possibility for explaining why the majority of Aboriginal children did not attend anglo-european schools throughout the nineteenth century as well as accounting for the minimal numbers who did. Yet this possibility is denied by the conflation of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal views on schooling in *Clean, Clad and Courteous*. A whole host of other possibilities are denied by the tenuous historical consensus between Aboriginal and anglo-european people that is integral to Fletcher's theoretical framework. In particular, humanitarian liberalism minimises the possibility of a more rigorous understanding of the complex historical relationships between Aboriginal communities, the state and education.

The distorted accounts offered in liberal histories of Aboriginal education obviously are constructed through a process which consists, in part, of selecting particular issues for discussion and ignoring others. Other aspects of this process include drawing on anglo-european voices to tell the story of Aboriginal schooling, offering only selected Aboriginal voices around the periphery of anglo-european concerns, emphasising consensus over conflict, and enhancing the passivity of Aboriginal people as historical actors. This process further includes a specific view of the power relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. More specifically *Clean, Clad and Courteous* suggests that the power relationship between indigenous people and invaders was *always* one where the invaders had supremacy. It does so in at least four different ways.

One is the way in which Aboriginal people are generally passive in the text. Although Fletcher acknowledges that his history is essentially an analysis of government policy, by ignoring Aboriginal participation in, and influence on, the process of policy formulation, the historical account is one which emphasises anglo-europeans, their views and how they acted over time in order to bring about change. At its most basic level this enhances the view that it is non-Aboriginal people who have the right to act upon the social world and delineate its contours.

A second avenue is through emphasising consensus and minimising struggle. As research on New Zealand very clearly illustrates, this is not a theoretical point that should be taken for granted. Although missionaries first set up their mission stations in New Zealand in 1814, and although the initial apparatus of the state appeared in the 1830s with the advent of British Resident Busby, Maori had numerical, political and economic sovereignty in New Zealand until the 1850s. These histories indicate that the school was an important site in the struggle over power between the indigenous Maori and the 'invading' British.²² The liberal approach that characterises Fletcher's account disposes of the broader struggle by disposing of Aboriginal agency. In so doing it denies the possibility of a story which begins with Aboriginal sovereignty over Australia in 1788 and which shapes its account around schooling as a site of struggle by Aborigines to maintain their sovereignty in the face of British invasion.

Another is the way in which fragmented Aboriginal voices are allowed into the text to illustrate Aboriginal opposition to exclusion-from-school policies. These oppositional voices are not used to explore and explain why Aboriginal people failed to be heard, nor are they used to explore and explain why non-Aboriginal people managed to have their voices heard over Aboriginal people. By failing to explore this issue the liberal humanitarian text implies very strongly that it was to be expected that non-Aboriginal views would be those heeded by the state.

Together these three avenues point very strongly to an underlying assumption that non-Aboriginal supremacy and Aboriginal oppression was both natural and inevitable, and that this has been the pattern of power relations since the arrival of the First Fleet in 1788. This assumption is reinforced by the fourth avenue, which derives from the emphasis on consensual views and the notion of a neutral state.

By conceptualising the government as a neutral site which responded in the nineteenth century to the agitation of white communities, *Clean, Clad and Courteous* draws on a pluralist theory of the state. According to this theory, the state is an empty vehicle waiting to be driven by whichever interest group manages to climb inside and take hold of the steering wheel. All interest groups, this theory continues, have equal access to the vehicle of the state, and thus have an equal chance of capturing the state for their purposes.²³ By pointing to the way in which some Aboriginal parents objected to the exclusion of their children from state schools, Fletcher construes Aborigines as a legitimate interest group over this issue. Yet, as I have already suggested, the fragmented Aboriginal voices that are allowed into the text are not used to explore and explain why Aboriginal people failed to be heard over non-Aboriginal people. The conclusion we are left to draw then from reading the text is that if Aborigines were organised, vocal, politically astute and so on, then they could have captured the state for their own purposes. This further implies that Aboriginal people have themselves to blame for the overt and systematic discrimination against Aborigines which has occurred since 1788.

While these four avenues construct a coherent pattern of power relations in which non-Aboriginal supremacy is taken for granted, there are also tensions between them. Indeed, if we place the power relations inherent in the pluralist view of the state alongside the argument about discrimination, a major theoretical dissonance is apparent. On the one hand we are presented with a reasonably explicit view of power depicted through a neutral government which incidentally functions to institutionalise racism to the disadvantage of Aborigines. On the other hand we are presented with an implicit view of power which enhances the historical inevitability of white domination (and Aboriginal subjugation). Ultimately these disparate views operate together to blame Aborigines for their own oppression.

These problems with the liberal humanitarian conception of power relations can be avoided by inserting Aboriginal agency into the theoretical framework. For instance, *Clean, Clad and Courteous* suggests that changes in policies on schooling for Aborigines during the mid to late twentieth century are the result of pressures being brought to bear on the Department of Education by more enlightened government agencies. This appears to be a creative variation of either pluralism or

'great men' theories, or both. (Along pluralist lines the Department of Education is equated with the neutral state and other government agencies become the external pressure groups, while under the 'great men' umbrella government departments become institutional versions of men of great vision.) In any event, this view of the state functions to silence the substantial challenges to government policies that have been initiated and conducted by various Aboriginal people and communities during many critical periods since invasion. Such periods include initial invasion (which varies from the late eighteenth century onwards, depending on the geographic area), the establishment of government reserves in the late nineteenth century, the Great Depression of the 1930s, and cultural revitalisation from the 1960s. All of these challenges have resulted in changes to government policy - albeit not always in the form argued for by Aboriginal people.²⁴ In other words, by incorporating Aboriginal agency systematically into the account it is possible to construct an argument which recognises not only that Aboriginal people have been discriminated against but that they have actively struggled to change this situation. In this way the story of non-Aboriginal domination is no longer taken for granted, and analysis of government education policies must necessarily explore *the role of schooling in the process by which anglo-european became dominant, and how policy changes have involved re-asserting this position of anglo-europeans dominance.*

Clearly the concept of a 'neutral' state is inadequate for this task. A neutral state - which in *Clean, Clad and Courteous* is manifested through the Department of Education - represents the core of the more sophisticated version of liberal text evident in Australian historiography. Yet in Fletcher's humanitarian liberal account, this sophistication is extremely superficial. Moreover, this superficiality glosses over some severe theoretical limitations which have ensured that the central purpose of *Clean, Clad and Courteous* is undermined at every point. By choosing to focus on government policy but drawing on the notion of a neutral state, Fletcher has constructed a text which ultimately is unable to present a sympathetic and rigorous history of Aboriginal education. Instead, this humanitarian liberal text continues the project of colonisation in more subtle and complex ways than the fundamentalist liberal account of Aboriginal education.

Conclusion

The colonising project is one which the missionaries, settlers, and government authorities first brought to Australia in 1788. At its worst, this project is continued by fundamentalist liberal histories, which actively promote the argument that Aborigines require(d) 'civilising'. At its best, this project is continued by humanitarian liberal accounts, which perpetuate a benevolent form of paternalism. Perhaps, however, it is the humanitarian liberal text which is the most dangerous. This type of text appears to offer a more sympathetic and critical approach than fundamental liberalism, but at the same time it constructs Aboriginal people as responsible for their own plight.

Regardless of which approach characterises the liberal text, both versions systematically deny Aboriginal agency and conceal Aboriginal views, both versions obscure the (on-going) historic struggle between Aboriginal communities and the invaders, and both versions take anglo-european domination for granted. By constructing historical accounts in this way, the liberal paradigm continues the process of colonisation as surely as the Native Institution and the segregated systems of Aboriginal schools intended to do.

If historians are to produce a viable historiography of Aboriginal education then the limitations of, and the distortions produced by, the theoretical traditions which shape their research need to be addressed both urgently and critically. This essay has argued that the central problematic in liberal histories of Aboriginal education are the distortions produced by an absence of Aboriginal agency. It is to this area then that historians need to turn their attention first.

Notes

1. Fletcher, J.J. (1989) *Clean, Clad and Courteous: A History of Aboriginal Education in New South Wales*. The Author: Sydney, 7.
2. Ibid. Backpiece; Fletcher, J.J. (1977) 'A History of Aboriginal Education in New South Wales 1788-1947'. Unpublished M.Ed. Thesis, .University of New England.
3. For general critiques of liberal or 'whig' histories, see for example: Butterfield, H. (1931) *The Whig Interpretation of History*. Bell: London; Burrow, J. (1983) *A Liberal Descent: Victorian Historians and the English Past*. Cambridge University Press: New York; Hirmelfarb, G. (1987) *The New History and the Old*. Cambridge, Massachusetts.: Belknap Press/Harvard University Press.

Although there are fewer critiques of liberalism *per se* within the history of education, see for example: Bailyn, B. (1960) *Education in the Forming of American Society: Needs and Opportunities for Study*. Chapel Hill, Virginia: University of North Carolina Press; Silver, H. (1983) *Education as History: Interpreting Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Education*. London/New York: Methuen (especially 1-14); Gordon, P. & Szreter, R. (ed.) (1989) *History of Education. The Making of a Discipline*. London: Woburn Press (especially 1-18); Olssen, M. (1987) 'What Really Happened? Varieties of educational History'. In R. Openshaw, & D. McKenzie (eds) *Reinterpreting the Educational Past. Essays in the History of New Zealand Education*. Wellington: NZCER, 21-38.
4. The traditions of liberal historiography derive from and are linked with the enormous historical changes which produced liberalism as an ideology, but are too complex to discuss here.
5. For example, Warwick, D. & Williams, J. (1980) 'History and the Sociology of Education', *British Journal of the Sociology of Education*, 1 (3), 333-346; Abrams, P. (1982) *Historical Sociology*. Somerset, England: Open Books; MacKenzie, D. (1984) 'Ideology and the History of Education in New Zealand', *New Zealand Journal of Educational Studies*, 19(1), 2-10.
6. Olssen, M. (1987) 'What Really Happened? Varieties of Educational History'. In R. Openshaw & D. McKenzie (eds) *Reinterpreting the Educational Past. Essays in the History of New Zealand Education*. Wellington: NZCER, 21-38.
7. For an excellent discussion on the ideology of liberalism and its current themes see: Hall, S. (1989) 'Variants of Liberalism'. In J. Donald and S. Hall (eds) *Politics and Ideology*. Open University Press: Milton Keynes/Philadelphia, 34-69.
8. Spaul, A. (1981) 'The Biographical Tradition of Australian Education', *ANZHESS*, 10 (2), 1-10. For a critique of 'great men history' see, for example: Fox-Genovese, E. (1982) 'Placing Women's History in History', *New Left Review*, 133, 5-29; Kelly, J. (1984) *Women, History and Theory*. Chicago University Press: Chicago; Matthews, J. (1986) 'Feminist History', *Labour History*, 50, 147-153.
9. Bannister, H. (1980) 'The centralization Problematic', *The Australian Journal of Education*, 24(3), 246-264. 10
10. Bridges, B. (1968) 'Aboriginal Education in Eastern Australia (NSW) 1788-1855', *The Australian Journal of Education*, 12 (3), 225-243; Bridges, B. (1972) 'The Native Institution, Parramatta and Blacktown. Part I. 1814-1920', *The Forum of Education*, 31 (1), 75-90; Bridges, B. (1972) 'The Native Institution, Parramatta and Blacktown. Part II. 1820-1829', *The Forum of Education*, 31 (2), 157-175.
11. See, for instance, Middleton, S. (1990) 'Women, Equality and Equity in Liberal Education Policies 1945-1968'. In S. Middleton, J. Codd & A. Jones (eds) *New Zealand Education Policy Today*. Wellington: Allen & Unwin, 68-93.
12. On these policies see, for example: Read, P. (nd) *The Stolen Generations. The Removal of Aboriginal Children in New South Wales 1883-1969*. NSW Ministry of Aboriginal Affairs: Sydney; Read, P. (1983) 'A Rape of the Soul So Profound: Some Reflections on the Dispersal Policy in New South Wales', *Aboriginal History*, 7 (1), 23-33; Tucker, M. (1984) *If Everyone Cared. The Autobiography of Margaret Tucker*. London: Grosvenor; Edwards, C. & Read, P. (eds) (1989) *The Lost Children*. Sydney: Doubleday.
13. The reluctance of Aboriginal parents to place their children in the native Institution initially, and then for any protracted length of time, is well documented in recent research: Brook, J. & Kohen J. (1991)

The Parramatta Native Institution and the Black Town: A History. Kensington: New South Wales University Press (especially 54-89).

14. Fletcher, J.J. (1989). *Clean, Clad and Courteous*, 7.
15. *Ibid*, 9 and 310-336.
16. It is important to note here that in Fletcher's account it is state agencies other than the Department of Education which not only initiated the dismantling of the segregated school system but which also inserted the argument that the new form of integrated schooling denied Aboriginal children their culture.
17. Cf. statistical evidence in Fletcher, J.J. (1989) *Clean, Clad and Courteous*; Fletcher, J.J. (1977) 'A History of Aboriginal Children in New South Wales 1788-1947'; Snow, D. (1989) 'The State, Youth and Schooling: The Social Construction of Studenthood in New South Wales 1788- 1948'. Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, University of Wollongong (especially 293-302).
18. Reynolds, H. (1983) 'Aborigines and European Social Hierarchy', *Aboriginal History*, 7, 124-133.
19. On the stated purposes of the Native Institution see Bridges, B. (1972) 'The Native Institution, Parramatta and Blacktown. Part II. 1820-1829'. Also see Brook, J. & Kohen, J. (1991) *The Parramatta Native Institution and the Black Town*.
20. Christie, M. (1979) 'The Failure of the Port Phillip Aboriginal Protectorate 1838-1849', *ANZHEJ Journal*, 8, 8-21; Read, P. (1983) 'A History of the Wiradjuri People of New South Wales 1883-1969'. Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis (2 volumes), Australian National University.
21. These issues appears consistently across a range of literature, from 'academic' analyses to oral histories and autobiographical accounts. See, for example, Gilbert, K. (1977) *Living Black. Black Tales to Kevin Gilbert*. Allen Lane: Victoria; Thorpe Clark, M. (1979) *The Boy From Cumeroogunga. The Story of Sir Douglas Ralph Nicholls*. Sydney: Hodder & Stoughton; Critchett, J. (1980) *Our Land Till We Die. A History of the Framlingham Aborigines*. Victoria: Warrnambool Institute Press; Reynolds, H. (1982) *The Other Side of the Frontier. Aboriginal Resistance to the European Invasion of Australia*. Victoria: Penguin; Read, P. (ed.) (1984) *Down There With Me on the Cowra Mission. An Oral History of Erambie Aboriginal Reserve, Cowra, New South Wales*. Sydney: Pergamon; Tucker, M. (1984) *If Everyone Cared*; Read, P. (1988) *A Hundred Years War: The Wiradjuri People and the State*. Sydney: Australian National University Press; Thomson, J. (ed.) (1989) *Reaching Back. Queensland Aboriginal People Recall Early Days at Yarrabah Mission*. Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press.
22. The term 'invading' is not commonly used in New Zealand accounts, primarily because the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi is 1840 by some Maori is seen to constitute an agreement about subsequent pakeha (non-Maori) occupation of land. This, however, is a moot point and could be applied in the sense it is used in Australia quite productively to the New Zealand scene.

Accessible research on schooling as a site of struggle in New Zealand includes: Binney, J. (1969) 'Christianity and the Maoris to 1840: A Comment', *New Zealand Journal of History*, 3 (2), 143-165; Jackson, M.D. (1975) 'Literacy, Communications and Social Change: A Study of the Meaning and Effect of Literacy in Early Nineteenth Maori Society'. In I.H. Kauhara (ed.) *Conflict and Compromise. Essays on the Maori Since Colonisation*. Wellington: Wellington, 27-54; Smith, L.T., Snow, D. & Simon, J. (forthcoming) *I Nga Ra O Rua: Educational Discourses of Colonisation in Nineteenth Century Aotearoa*. Auckland: Research Unit for Maori Education, University of Auckland. However, the most substantial research in this area is: Simon J. (1990) 'The Place of Schooling in Maori-Pakeha Relations'. Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, University of Auckland (especially 66-104); Jenkins, K. (1991) 'Te Ihi, Te Mana, Te Wihi o Te Ao Tuhi: Maori Print Literacy from 1814-1855: Literacy, Power and Colonisation'. Unpublished M.A. Thesis, University of Auckland.
23. On the pluralist theory of the state see, for example: Cole, G. (1989) *The Pluralist Theory of the State: Selected Writings of G.D.H. Cole, J.N. Figgis and H.J. Laski*. London/New York: Routledge; Held, D. (1987) *Models of Democracy*. UK: Polity (especially 186-214).
24. Evidence about various critical periods can be found in Lippman, L. (1981) *Generations of Resistance. The Aboriginal Struggle for Justice*. Longman Cheshire: Australia.