

**Fiona Probyn-Rapsey. *Made to Matter: White Fathers, Stolen Generations*.**

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White men who fathered the children of Aboriginal women through the twentieth century are generally absent from both popular and political imaginings of the story of the Stolen Generations in contemporary Australia. This is where Fiona Probyn-Rapsey begins her book *Made to Matter: White Fathers, Stolen Generations*. Her focus is on the ‘personal involvement’ of white fathers of Aboriginal children and how their stories complicate the way that governments sought to deploy them as agents of colonial regulation. Because, contrary to the absence of the white fathers of Aboriginal children in our contemporary national imaginary, ‘In 20<sup>th</sup>-century Australia, white paternity of Aboriginal children was positioned as key to the biological assimilation of Aboriginal people’ (viii). Some scientists saw this assimilation proceeding through the imagined process of ‘breeding out the colour’ (x, xi). In any case it was the visibility of white paternity in ‘half-caste’ children that so often lead to them being targeted for removal from their Aboriginal mothers, families and communities, the major strategy of assimilation during the twentieth century.

*Made to Matter* sets out to undo some of the silence that has surrounded white fathers. In five chapters through analysis of a rich archive of sources Probyn-Rapsey offers a loose typology of white fathers. While many such men did not acknowledge their relationships with Aboriginal women or their children, some did, and Probyn-Rapsey uses these as ‘critics of white culture’ (viii), as troubling embodiments of some of the tensions that were evident in colonial culture more broadly.

The book builds on the conceptual frameworks of historian and anthropologist Ann Laura Stoler (2002) and post-colonial critic Patrick Wolfe (2006) who observe two apparently conflicting aims of Australian settler colonialism—‘to eliminate but also to *be* the indigene’ (citing Wolfe, viii, original emphasis); simultaneously ‘incorporating and distancing’ (quoting Stoler, viii). Archaeologist Denis Byrne’s notion of ‘jangling nerves’ is invoked throughout to describe the tensions of these conflicting imperatives, which play out across ‘domestic, familial and national’ sites (viii).

The first chapter of *Made to Matter*, ‘Husbands,’ analyses a series of letters and reports by, to and about white fathers, mostly written 1902–04, found mainly in the archives of the Queensland Director of Native Affairs. These concerned white men’s desire to marry Aboriginal women and/or to take responsibility for Aboriginal children.

The second chapter, ‘Breeders,’ tells of a debate between two men who took opposing views on the question of white men’s fathering of children with Aboriginal women. Cecil Cook, Chief Protector Aborigines in the Northern Territory (NT) from 1927–1939 wrote reports which argued that white paternity would ‘uplift’ the Aboriginal race. Xavier Herbert wrote novels and other material about race relations set in the NT in the 1930s. ‘While Cook was campaigning to “breed out the colour”, Herbert was dreaming of “breeding in” the Indigeneity’ (39).

‘The Combo’ introduces Bill Harney, ‘bushie and teller of tales’ (46) who becomes a key source for the book. Among many jobs in the bush, Harney worked as ‘patrol officer for the Native Affairs Branch (1940–47)’ where he would have been responsible for removing children (47). He wrote ten books about bush life in the NT, published 1943–1968. Harney had two Aboriginal wives, Linda, a woman from the Groote Eylandt Mission, and then Ludi Yibuluyma, and fathered two children with each. This made him a combo; Bill Harney wrote that this was a transformative process, that such men became anti-racist (46, 80). Harney was a prolific story-teller although he keeps as many secrets as he reveals about white men in the NT, and none of his books cover his years as a patrol officer. His son Bill Yidumduma, who had an Aboriginal father and extended family (80), wrote about Bill Harney, so this chapter contains an Aboriginal perspective on a white father through a son’s own stories.

‘Black Sheep’ examines stories written by white authors about white men who lived with Aboriginal wives, all but one published around 2000. The most part of this chapter concerns Daryl Tonkin, a bushman, but one who owned land. Tonkin lived with his wife Euphemia, a Kurnai woman, their nine children and others of her family, in Gippsland, Victoria before and after World War 2. The other men lived in the northern part of Australia. White woman Carolyn Landon’s first account of Daryl Tonkin is followed by a more reflexive second book, guided in part by his Aboriginal daughter Pauline Mullett and, along with Yankunytjatjara elder Bob Randall’s story of his white father, this brings an Aboriginal perspective to this group of narratives.

The fifth chapter discusses ‘Jim Crows,’ a term borrowed from Bill Harney to describe those men who supported and indeed often policed strict, racist segregation in their public lives but were engaging in sexual relations with Aboriginal women in private. ‘The cultivation of paternal indifference’ (109) is at the heart of the stories of these men. In Harney’s view these men were often the most cruel; confident but anxious about their secrets (109). Howden Drake-Brockman is one of those discussed. He was identified in Sally Morgan’s book *My Place* as the white man who fathered her Aboriginal grandmother and her great uncle (and, it is suggested, her mother too) and was then defended by his white daughter Judith Drake-Brockman (116–17, 136–37). This chapter draws on several Aboriginal women’s autobiographical accounts as well as the work of white historians.

Probyn-Rapsey brings us to the fact that white fathers might be relatively immaterial in the stories of the women they had sex with, and the children they were biologically responsible for. In some cases the white men were good husbands and fathers but in their absence the women and children were often part of Aboriginal family and community, with Aboriginal husbands and fathers. The white men, in any case, were rarely the instruments of assimilation as imagined by the state. The materiality of biological white paternity was significant, however, when its absence was justification for the removal of children.

The book’s conclusion comes firmly to the present and non-Indigenous desire for reconciliation. Probyn-Rapsey uses the book’s investigation of white fathers to caution against the familial trope of ‘embrace’ which those who wish to move beyond colonialism often invoke. ‘This is a form of kin-fused reconciliation where family connections are envisaged as an answer to racial discrimination’ (139). The book recovers white fathers for a more complex account of Australia’s past but warns against translating this ‘into a shared history’ (141). In fact, Probyn-Rapsey concludes that the white father’s significance may well be his irrelevance (148).

*Made to Matter* is not only a typology of white fathers. It is also a survey of how some Aboriginal women have been treated by white men. I felt that justice was not always done to the suffering of the women who were described in the men's letters or their stories. In her brief discussion of Nicholas Jose's *Black Sheep: Journey to Borroloola* (2002) Probyn-Rapsey gets to this problem of the sidelining of Aboriginal women's suffering, and their bestowal of care and connection. In his journey to explore a familial relationship to Roger Jose, who 'lived "blackfella" . . . as a combo' (89) in the Gulf of Carpentaria in the middle of the century, Nicholas Jose seeks connection to a genuinely deserved 'belonging in this country' (quoting Jose, 89). Probyn-Rapsey points out that the two women who Roger Jose lived with, Maggie and Bidy, are left out of Nicholas Jose's genealogy of belonging, yet it was only in relation with them that Roger can offer a link to the indigeneity that Nicholas Jose seeks (90–91). But in the context of the question of the place of Aboriginal women's stories I felt uncomfortable with the celebrated role that Bill Harney occupies in the book—given his complicity in the removal of children and in (at least) the narrative protection of other men who treated Aboriginal women violently, even while he also provides a historical and textual voice that condemned such men. At the beginning of the book Probyn-Rapsey writes of the fathers that 'the white men rarely speak for themselves' (xvi) but the voices of the Aboriginal women to whom they related are even more silent and I wanted more to be made of this.

I also wanted more history. The chapters cross a long period (1900s to 1950s) over different states and territories (NT, Qld, WA, Victoria). Some more information about social, political and legal context would have helped me place the stories. Some more sign-posting about their diversity would have also been helpful. Probyn-Rapsey does not set out to compare, say, letters written to the Qld Office of Native Affairs in the 1900s with accounts of mid-century life in a small Victorian timber-milling community written at the turn of the twenty-first century, but a foregrounded account of the rationale of the book's structure, and its moving among different kinds of texts, written about different times and places, is missing.

I have two quibbles of lesser order. The reader waits until page 52 for the author to make reference to her own position ('a white woman'), and even here she identifies as a reader, not a writer. On page 141 she appears again, although not in the first person, when she writes that the book shows that Aboriginal people perceived white behaviour differently to how white people perceived it themselves: 'That applies to my own work'. A biographical confession is not the solution but some discussion of the author's position and investments in relation to, well, white fathers, might be. There were also two occasions when I wondered why the authority of Aboriginal people was questioned. Probyn-Rapsey writes of Lorna Cubillo's claim, in the historic court case that sought compensation for the Stolen Generations, that Bill Harney was the man who 'allegedly forcibly removed her from her grandmother'. The next sentence says 'It could not be established during the court case whether or not this was the case' (62). In the next chapter she refers to 'Bob Randall's account of his white father Bill Liddle' but goes on to write 'Bob Randall was *probably* a child of Bill Liddle' (85, emphasis added).

In summary I found this book readable, interesting, important and insightful. Its account of the diversity of white fathers delivers a nuanced account of the many intricate spaces of colonialism—its strategies, its problems, its failures. The ongoing problem of the white father is evident if only in their ongoing absence in our contemporary imaginary. *Made to Matter* offers useful history to keep thinking through the complexity of this problem.

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