

Men in the middle fail Aborigines

By CAMERON FORBES

"EARLIER that morning," Stewart Harris reports, "the Prime Minister, cool and debonair in pink shirt and slacks, had opened a residential school for Aboriginal children at Dhupuma.

"I wish I could adequately describe the artificiality of this occasion and of every occasion I have ever seen when politicians, senior public servants and big businessmen meet Aborigines."

The quotation is from the opening chapter of Stewart Harris' book, **This Our Land**, which was released yesterday. Harris sees a vast majority of Australians apathetic to the terrible problems of Aborigines: infant deaths, child malnutrition, 7 per cent. unemployment, discrimination before the law, denial of claims for tribal land.

He suggests, at the end of the chapter, that "the Australian people should now, perhaps, ask themselves whether their Government has the understanding or will to try to solve these problems".

Harris has found his own answer. Two chapters later he says that there has been a failure of will by both the Gorton and the McMahon Governments, which have assumed that the people do not care enough about Aborigines.

And do they? Harris says that confusion sown by politicians has made it very hard for Australians to feel strongly the need to hear and respect Aboriginal opinion. Those politicians, he claims, never really communicate with Aborigines because they will not take the trouble to sit down, quietly listen and try to understand.

The major concern of Harris' book is to promote understanding between the majority of Australians and the gravely underprivileged Aboriginal minority.

But he is also strongly critical of the men in the middle, the politicians who should be the bridge. "McMahon has in fact done more for Aborigines than any other Australian Prime Minister but in the context of their need nothing like enough. He has not had the will to overcome the meanness and ignorance of his Country Party colleagues in Cabinet."

But the book is not a diatribe. Of course there is anger. Who can remain calm after seeing weak and stunted babies, visiting rubbish-tip camps or talking to gentle top-enders about their alienated land?

There is anger, but there is also a plain telling of the Aboriginal story and factual information about the difficulties they face.

Harris, who is Australian correspondent for the **Times** of London, gives a particularly good account of the Ningla a-Na campaign, the issue which is likely to unite full-bloods, fringe-dwellers and part-Aborigines scattered in the cities.

"Ningla a-Na" is Arunta for "we are hungry for our land". Harris describes the strength of Aboriginal links with tribal land. He stresses the limited nature of the claims, and dismisses effectively the argument that the granting of land rights would open the way to apartheid.

He points out that the U.S., by 1945, had paid about \$800 million to Indians for purchase of their land and that since 1947 another \$370 million claimed by individual tribes has been approved.

EARLIER this year Congress passed the Alaska Native Land Bill, which gives Indians and Eskimos \$1000 million and 40 million acres of land.

In a book with few white heroes, the Council of Aboriginal Affairs and its chairman (Dr. H. C. Coombs) emerge fittingly as champions of the Aborigines.

Harris' book, along with Dr. Coombs' superb George Judah Cohen Memorial Lecture (to be published by the Extension Board, Sydney University) is a worthwhile introduction to the problems of Aborigines.

If enough of the apathetic majority read them, the Government may find the will to give the Aboriginal people the help and understanding they need.

• **This Our Land** by Stewart Harris (ANU Press, recommended price \$1.65).