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'Breed out the Colour' or the Importance of Being White

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This article examines inter-war proposals to 'breed out the colour' of Aborigines of mixed descent. Positioning these proposals in the context of contemporary Australian nationalism, scientific discourses and administrative practice, the article concludes with a discussion of their alleged genocidal intent.

IN AUSTRALIA between the wars, 'breeding out the colour' was propounded as a solution to the 'half-caste problem'. It was a perverse proposition. The supposed problems deriving from miscegenation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians would be remedied by instituting still more comprehensive regimes of miscegenation. But now miscegenation would be managed. And the perversity of absorption did not end there. It was a nationalist project, aspiring to keep Australia white; but it flew in the face of commonly understood notions of White Australia as a doctrine of racial purity. Absorption was intensely racist, but at the same time defied prevalent racist assumptions of 'hybrid inferiority' and demands for the segregation of 'half-castes'. It was in certain respects a eugenist strategy, but in others clashed with eugenic principles. Absorption held a component of humanitarian welfarism; it also evinced a profound disdain for the subjects of its welfare interventions, a disdain that could extend to the attempted eradication of all vestiges of Aboriginality. This article explores these multiple and conflicting dimensions of schemes to 'breed out the colour' in the inter-war years.¹

For all its myriad inspirations and aspirations, 'breeding out the colour' was above all just that: a stratagem to erase 'colour', to bleach Australia white through programs of regulated reproduction. So committed were its proponents to the process of whitening that one could imagine that they took whiteness as an end in itself, a taken-for-granted good. Perhaps they did. Whiteness was a potent signifier: of virtue, of racial superiority, above all in this context, of national membership. Breeding the colour out of persons of Aboriginal descent was equally a process of breeding them into the community of the nation. Inter-war programs of biological absorption should be understood, I argue, in the

¹ This is a substantially revised version of a paper presented to the History and Sociology of Eugenics Conference, University of Newcastle, 27–28 April 2000. The original version of the paper was published under the title "'Breed Out the Colour": Reproductive Management for White Australia' in *'A Race for a Place': Eugenics, Darwinism and Social Thought and Practice in Australia*, eds Martin Crotty, John Germov and Grant Rodwell (Newcastle: Faculty of Arts and Social Science, University of Newcastle, 2000), 61–70. I wish to thank the conference participants, especially Stephen Garton, for their helpful comments, and the anonymous referees for this journal for their more stringent critiques.

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context of a strongly ethnic conception of Australian nationhood, whereby myths of blood kinship and notions of an organic community of sentiment and values provided a core of national cohesion. Beyond that, I also consider several issues highlighted in the recent historiography of absorption, including its connections with eugenics and whether it manifested genocidal intent.

From inevitability of nature to imposition of state

Biological absorption was not an innovation of the inter-war years, although its radical systematisation was. In the nineteenth century, absorption was more an assumption than a strategy, many settler Australians considering the biological incorporation of 'half-castes' into the wider population to be an ineluctable process of nature proceeding without need of state intervention.² By the early twentieth century state intervention was intensifying, with fair-complexioned children of mixed descent routinely taken from their families with a view to their absorption into the white population.³ Yet these absorptionist practices were unsystematic, their potential impact confounded by the simultaneously pursued policy of segregation, isolating 'half-castes' as much as possible from the White community. Segregation fostered the entrenchment of more or less enclosed mixed-descent communities, which in the inter-war years were observed to be reproducing much faster than White Australia.⁴ From this arose fears of an escalating 'half-caste problem', compounded of both the rapid growth rate of the mixed-descent population and the fact that 'mixed-bloods' were demonstrably not mixing with White Australians but forming their own distinct enclaves—'dark ethnic pockets' in the words of one observer.⁵ As fears flamed, absorption was pursued more zealously.

From the late 1920s/early 1930s, stringent and systematic strategies of absorption were propounded. Rather than merely removing fair-complexioned 'mixed-bloods' from their families, the state would actively intervene to promote the reproduction of such fair-skinned individuals. The reproductive futures of 'mixed-bloods' would be regulated, each successive generation becoming progressively more European in ancestry, until ultimately all outward signs of

² See for example Lorimer Fison and A.W. Howitt, *Kamilaroi and Kurnai* (Melbourne: George Robertson, 1880), 186.

³ Peter Read, *The Stolen Generations: The Removal of Aboriginal People in NSW 1883 to 1969* (Sydney: NSW Ministry of Aboriginal Affairs, 1981), 5–8; David Hollinsworth, *Race and Racism in Australia* (Katoomba: Social Science Press, 2nd edn, 1998), 121–4; Heather Goodall, 'New South Wales', in *Contested Ground: Australian Aborigines under the British Crown*, ed. Ann McGrath (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1995), 76–7; Richard Broome, 'Victoria', in *ibid.*, 140–1; Richard Broome, *Aboriginal Australians: Black Responses to White Dominance 1788–1994* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2nd edn, 1994), 134.

⁴ Russell McGregor, *Imagined Destinies: Aboriginal Australians and the Doomed Race Theory, 1880–1939* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1997), 129–34, 137.

⁵ Norman Tindale, 'Survey of the Half-caste Problem in South Australia', *Proceedings of the Royal Geographical Society of Australasia (South Australian Branch)*, 42 (1940–41): 68.

Aboriginal descent were 'bred out'. This required both the promotion of inter-breeding between White and part-Aboriginal Australians, and the curtailment of unions between full- and part-Aborigines, these requirements and restrictions necessarily extending across several generations. It is this attribute of trans-generational reproductive management that distinguishes inter-war programs of 'breeding out the colour' from earlier absorptionist practices. Implementation of such ambitious schemes, at least with any degree of rigour and determination, was attempted only in Western Australia and the Northern Territory, although traces may be discerned in other jurisdictions.

Throughout the inter-war years, state intervention in the lives of Aboriginal people became steadily more intensive and intrusive, while at the same time the categories of person to whom Aboriginal legislation applied widened.⁶ This was not exclusively connected to absorptionist policies; in Queensland, state intervention was arguably more intense than in any other jurisdiction, but Queensland did not pursue a policy of 'breeding out the colour'. In jurisdictions that did, increased state powers were certainly a boon to the absorptionist cause. The Western Australian *Native Administration Act* of 1936 gave the newly styled Commissioner of Native Affairs, A.O. Neville, powers over a much wider range of persons of Aboriginal descent than hitherto, including legal guardianship of their children, limitations on their right to associate with other Aborigines, and control over their choice of marital partner.⁷ 'Breeding out the colour' was nowhere prescribed as the objective of the Act, but its provisions were eagerly deployed to this end. As Anna Haebich notes, 'while the government did not officially adopt the policy of biological absorption, the 1936 Act nevertheless gave Neville the necessary powers for its implementation'.⁸

Haebich's remark raises the question of whether 'breeding out the colour' was ever, legitimately, government 'policy', a point that has been 'debated' by Robert Manne and P.P. McGuinness.⁹ Indisputably, in my view, 'breeding out the colour' was policy, in that it was a systematic course of action endorsed and pursued by those charged with authority over Aboriginal affairs. However, it was policy initiated not by parliament or minister but by senior members of the bureaucracy. That the initiative in policy-making should be so delegated is indicative of the slight importance attached to Aboriginal matters, even at a time of rising public concern over the 'half-caste problem'. It is likely too that politicians deliberately distanced themselves from such a policy initiative, for whenever proposals to 'breed out the colour' were publicly aired, they provoked a chorus

⁶ C.D. Rowley, *Outcasts in White Australia* (Canberra: ANU Press, 1971), especially 20–5, 41–61; Broome, *Aboriginal Australians*, 161–3.

⁷ Anna Haebich, *For Their Own Good: Aborigines and Government in the Southwest of Western Australia, 1900–1940* (Perth: University of Western Australia Press, 1988) 348–51; Pat Jacobs, *Mister Neville: A Biography* (Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1990), 240, 262.

⁸ Haebich, 349.

⁹ P.P. McGuinness, 'Poor Fella My "Stolen Generation"', *Quadrant* 43, no. 11 (November 1999): 2; Robert Manne, *In Denial: The Stolen Generations and the Right* (Melbourne: Schwartz Publishing, 2001), 64–5.

of condemnation.¹⁰ Even within the bureaucracy, misgivings were sounded. Sometimes misgivings were on pragmatic grounds, as when J.A. Carrodus, Acting Administrator of the Northern Territory in 1934, stated that while the 'effort to breed out colour is a commendable one', it would fail. 'It will be found', Carrodus averred, 'that half-castes will prefer to marry half-castes', and Aboriginal administration would be better served by facing squarely the fact of 'a large natural increase in the half-caste population from the mating of half-caste with half-caste.'¹¹ Sometimes a note of idealism was introduced, as when H.C. Brown, Secretary to the federal Department of the Interior, pointed out the impropriety of flagrant state intervention in so private a matter as choice of marital partner.¹²

Such misgivings notwithstanding, the inordinate powers vested in the Chief Protector allowed Neville in Western Australia and Cecil Cook in the Northern Territory to pursue their ambitions with little overt official hindrance. The impediments came from elsewhere. Government parsimony was a far greater problem than deliberate obstructionism, particularly in Western Australia where Neville was never granted anywhere near adequate funding to realise his scheme.¹³ 'Breeding out the colour' failed to win the support of certain crucial groups. Missionary opinion was divided but tended to be hostile, the Australian National Missionary Conference of 1937 proclaiming its opposition.¹⁴ Neville, in fact, represented Christian missions as the single greatest impediment to his plans, since, as he complained at the 1937 Aboriginal Welfare Conference, missionaries 'allow the half-castes under their control to marry anybody'.¹⁵ That 'half-castes' should exercise no such freedom of choice of marital partner was, to Neville, axiomatic. But while he could prohibit 'undesirable' marriages, he could not compel 'desirable' ones, and 'half-caste' women displayed no overwhelming desire to marry White men (or vice versa). In the eleven years of Cook's Chief Protectorship, fewer than fifty such marriages were celebrated.¹⁶ Neville's plans seem to have met with no greater success.¹⁷ The gender-specific nature of absorption posed insuperable problems. Since the only inter-racial unions considered acceptable were of 'half-caste' women with White men, never the reverse, only

¹⁰ Tony Austin, 'Cecil Cook, Scientific Thought and "Half-castes" in the Northern Territory 1927-1939', *Aboriginal History* 14, no. 1 (1990): 115; Haebich, 318-19, 331; Jacobs, *Mister Neville*, 195, 260-1; McGregor, *Imagined Destinies*, 173-80.

¹¹ J.A. Carrodus, Report on the Northern Territory, 20 November 1934, Commonwealth Record Series (hereafter CRS) A1, 34/10021, National Archives of Australia, Canberra (hereafter NAA).

¹² H.C. Brown to Minister for the Interior, 3 November 1933, CRS A659, 40/1/408, NAA.

¹³ Jacobs, *Mister Neville*, 186-7; Haebich, 353-4. On the inadequate funding of Northern Territory Aboriginal administration see Andrew Markus, *Governing Savages* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1990), especially chapter 2.

¹⁴ *Australian National Missionary Conference, 1937: Report* (Sydney: National Missionary Council of Australia, 1937), 70.

¹⁵ *Aboriginal Welfare: Initial Conference of Commonwealth and State Aboriginal Authorities* (Canberra: Government Printer, 1937), 11.

¹⁶ Annual figures for these marriages are given in each of the Chief Protector's reports in the annual 'Reports on the Administration of the Northern Territory', in *Commonwealth Parliamentary Papers* between 1929 and 1939. See also Markus, 93.

¹⁷ Haebich, 352-6.

half the 'half-caste' population was eligible for participation in absorptionist programs.

Despite these serious—arguably insurmountable—difficulties, Western Australia and the Northern Territory persisted with the policy for roughly a decade, the 1930s. Whatever its positive outcomes, these were doubtless slight compared to the bitter harvest of broken families and blighted childhoods of the kind revealed in the 1997 *Bringing Them Home* report.¹⁸ And the most tragic aspect in this instance is that such suffering was occasioned primarily by a perceived need to remedy a 'problem' of skin-colour.

Scientific legitimisation

While the spectre of a 'rising tide of colour' inspired administrators to systematise their absorptionist practices, contemporary racial science lent some credibility to their efforts. In 1925 the Adelaide anthropologist, Dr Herbert Basedow, suggested that because of the close affinity of Aboriginal and Caucasian races, their mixed progeny could be rapidly whitened through successive accessions of white 'blood', without danger of Aboriginal characteristics reasserting themselves in later generations.¹⁹ Theories of Aboriginal-Caucasian race-relatedness had been propounded since the late nineteenth century, some scientists in the early twentieth century arguing, on the basis of blood-group and other tests, that Aborigines were in fact a primitive stem of the Caucasian race.²⁰ Basedow's suggested practical application of this theory was taken up and elaborated by other scientists, notably those on the Board for Anthropological Research at the University of Adelaide, whose chairman, Professor J.B. Cleland, was Australia's leading scientific advocate of biological absorption. The Board's efforts to scientifically appraise the feasibility of absorption culminated in the joint Harvard-Adelaide Universities Expedition of 1938-39, conducted by the Adelaide ethnologist Norman Tindale and the Harvard physical anthropologist J.B. Birdsell. On the basis of their meticulously detailed examinations, plus the assertion that 'the Australian aboriginal is recognised as being a forerunner of the Caucasian race', they concluded that absorption was both possible and desirable.²¹

However, theories of race-relatedness did not lead inexorably to the conclusion that 'colour' should be 'bred out.' Professor Frederic Wood Jones of the

¹⁸ *Bringing Them Home: Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families* (Sydney: Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997).

¹⁹ Herbert Basedow, *The Australian Aboriginal* (Adelaide: F.W. Preece and Sons, 1925), 59.

²⁰ Russell McGregor, 'An Aboriginal Caucasian: Some Uses for Racial Kinship in Early Twentieth Century Australia', *Australian Aboriginal Studies* 1 (1996): 11-14; Lucinda Aberdeen, 'Australian Scientific Research, "Aboriginal Blood" and the Racial Imaginary', in Crotty *et. al.*, 101-11.

²¹ Tindale, 66-161. See also Lecture by J.B. Birdsell to the Anthropological Society of South Australia, 24 July 1939, J.B. Cleland Collection, AA60, Acc. 238, South Australian Museum Anthropology Archives (hereafter Cleland Collection).

Anatomy School, University of Melbourne, pushed the Aboriginal-Caucasian connection harder and further than perhaps any other Australian scientist.²² He also repudiated schemes of 'breeding out the colour'.²³ Like all scientific (and other) ideas, the race-relatedness theory was polyvalent. Humanitarian activists freely used it as a vehicle for asserting Aboriginal claims on the Australian nation and fostering white sympathy for their plight. The Christian philanthropist, Mary Bennett, stated on the opening page of her 1930 publication, *The Australian Aboriginal as a Human Being*, that 'Like us they belong to the Caucasian stock'.²⁴ She was an uncompromising opponent of absorption.²⁵ Even Aboriginal activists were prepared to assert their race-relatedness to White Australians as a means of boosting their demands for citizen rights.²⁶ Moreover, the theory of Aboriginal-Caucasian relatedness commanded no scientific unanimity. Australia's only professor of anthropology, A.P. Elkin at the University of Sydney, repudiated it, along with schemes to 'breed out the colour'.²⁷

Although the race-relatedness theory was both contentious and polyvalent, it provided a vital prop for absorptionist proposals. Neville leant heavily upon it, while Cook had more occasional recourse to its support.²⁸ Even so, the theory of race-relatedness provided no legitimation for the actual procedures by which these administrators pursued their end: child removal, controlled marriages, ever-extending interventions in the lives of persons of mixed descent. Insofar as the scientific proponents of absorption suggested any practical measures, they were not necessarily congruent with official practice. Tindale, for example, recommended the 'dispersal of all artificial aggregates of mixed-bloods', the provision of full educational, training, welfare and health services, and a substantial relaxation of administrative controls, by which means absorption could proceed 'naturally', as he observed it already had in some places.²⁹ Tindale's reasoning was founded on a mistaken assumption that the efforts of mixed-

²² Frederic Wood Jones, *Australia's Vanishing Race* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1934); Jones, 'The Aborigines of Australia', in the British Medical Association, Victorian branch, *The Book of Melbourne, Australia, 1935* (Glebe: Australasian Medical Publishing Co., 1935), 109-19.

²³ Rowley, 36.

²⁴ Mary Bennett, *The Australian Aboriginal as a Human Being* (London: Alston Rivers, 1930), 13.

²⁵ Fiona Paisley, *Loving Protection? Australian Feminism and Aboriginal Women's Rights 1919-1939* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2000).

²⁶ John Patten and William Ferguson, *Aborigines Claim Citizen Rights! A Statement of the Case for the Aborigines' Progressive Association* (Sydney: The Publicist, 1937), 11. Ron Brunton (*Betraying the Victims: The Stolen Generations' Report*, Institute of Public Affairs Backgrounder, February 1998), and Robert Manne (*In Denial*, 36-7) misread this passage as an Aboriginal endorsement of 'breeding out the colour.' It was nothing of the kind. Like many earlier reformers, Patten and Ferguson simply affirmed their race-relatedness to white Australians, thereby promoting white sympathy for their cause. Neither the Aborigines' Progressive Association nor any other contemporary Aboriginal political group endorsed 'breeding out the colour'.

²⁷ A.P. Elkin, *The Australian Aborigines: How to Understand Them* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1938), 1-5.

²⁸ See for example *Aboriginal Welfare*, 10; A.O. Neville, *Australia's Coloured Minority: Its Place in the Community* (Sydney: Currawong, 1947), 58-63; Haebich, 316-17; Jacobs, *Mister Neville*, 193-4; Cook to Administrator, NT, 27 June 1933, CRS A659, 40/1/408, NAA.

²⁹ Tindale, 68-9, 116-20, 125-58.

descent persons 'to establish themselves as elements in the general Australian population' equated with a desire to metamorphose into White Australians. But his recommendations cannot be read as an endorsement of the intense state interventionism pursued by administrators of the day. Legitimation of that interventionism derived from other sources: partly, perhaps, from the fact that high levels of state intervention had been an accepted, even valued, component of Australian social life since Federation;³⁰ more immediately, from racist assumptions that Aborigines could be treated as an inert mass, to be moulded into whatever shape—or more pertinently here, colour—White officialdom decreed.

There was yet a more fundamental discrepancy between the scientific exponents of 'breeding out the colour' and those administrators who sought to implement it. Professor Cleland and his colleagues on the Board for Anthropological Research insisted on maintaining rigorous distinctions between the destiny of the 'half-caste' and that of the 'Aborigine'. 'Half-castes' were to be biologically absorbed into the White population; 'full-blood' Aborigines were to be preserved in pristine primitivity by their total isolation on vast reserves.³¹ Tindale's 'Survey', in addition to validating the biological absorption of 'half-castes', included a lengthy section urging the preservation of the Western Desert Aborigines as 'an unmodified and virile people' by their complete isolation on a vastly expanded reserve.³² However, reserves could serve contrary purposes. Neville seems to have regarded the Central Aboriginal Reserve—the very reserve Tindale referred to—as a place on which the remnant 'full-blood' population could conveniently expire.³³ At the 1937 Welfare Conference, he explained that the 'full-bloods' constituted a 'problem ... which will eventually solve itself [since] no matter what we do, they will die out'.³⁴ 'Dying out', however, should not be taken to mean that they would leave no descendants, merely none of fully Aboriginal ancestry. As the Commonwealth bureaucrat, J.A. Carrodus, stated at the 1937 conference: 'Ultimately, if history is repeated, the full-bloods will become half-castes'.³⁵ It was on this supposition that the more ardent advocates of 'breeding out the colour' envisaged the process eventually subsuming the entire Aboriginal race.

The most enthusiastic exponent of an extended concept of absorption was Western Australia's Commissioner Neville. At the 1937 Aboriginal Welfare Conference, which marked the peak of official endorsement of absorption, he

³⁰ W.K. Hancock, *Australia* (London: Ernest Benn, 1930); Tim Rowse, *Australian Liberalism and National Character* (Melbourne: Kibble Books, 1978).

³¹ J.B. Cleland, 'The Native of Central Australia and his Surroundings', *Proceedings of the Royal Geographical Society of Australasia, South Australian Branch* 35 (1933–34): 76–7, 81; Cleland to Minister for the Interior, 4 October 1932, Cleland Collection; Cleland to Minister for the Interior, 7 September 1936, CRS A1, 36/8795, NAA.

³² Tindale, 71–81.

³³ Pat O'Malley, 'Gentle Genocide: The Government of Aboriginal Peoples in Central Australia', *Social Justice* 21, no. 4 (Winter 1994): 52–3.

³⁴ *Welfare Conference*, 16.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 21.

posed the rhetorical question that marks the zenith of absorptionist fervour:

Are we going to have a population of 1,000,000 blacks in the Commonwealth, or are we going to merge them into our white community and eventually forget that there ever were any aborigines in Australia?

Lest he be misunderstood, he went on to give a detailed justification of the latter option.³⁶ Cecil Cook raised a similar scare scenario of 'a large black population' in the Northern Territory, rapidly reproducing and threatening to 'swamp the white'. Comprehensive absorption offered the only viable prophylactic, although Cook was more circumspect in his advocacy than Neville.³⁷ Other officials at the 1937 Welfare Conference seem to have been generally in agreement with this, although there were differences of opinion about the lengths to which the state could legitimately go to procure this end.

The only significant discordant voice at the 1937 conference was Queensland's J.W. Bleakley, who argued that 'the half-breed ... cannot happily be absorbed into the white race'; that while a small minority of 'quadroons' and 'octoroons' could take their 'place in the white community', the vast majority of 'crossbreeds':

will be more happily absorbed by their mother's people in circumstances where they can be given vocational and domestic training to take their part in the development of a self-contained native community.

Bleakley's proposals—and the regime he had instituted in Queensland—represent the acme of authoritarian paternalism. Yet he insisted that 'we have no right to attempt to destroy their [Aborigines'] national life. Like ourselves, they are entitled to retain their racial entity and racial pride'.³⁸ Bleakley sought to protect and control Aborigines as a national minority, whose membership included most (though not all) persons of mixed descent. Proponents of 'breeding out the colour', on the other hand, aimed deliberately to prevent the perpetuation of such a national minority.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 11.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 13–14. Although at the 1937 Conference Cook advocated comprehensive biological absorption, his position was inconsistent. Since 1935 he had moved tentatively toward proposals for the socio-cultural assimilation of 'full-bloods', with no necessary biological implications. See Markus, 102–6; McGregor, *Imagined Destinies*, 181–2.

³⁸ *Welfare Conference*, 8, 18, 20. Unaccountably, Bleakley still gave his signature to the Conference resolutions, including the now-infamous 'destiny of the race' resolution. For further detail on Bleakley's policies see his 'Can Our Aborigines be Preserved', *Australian Quarterly* (14 September 1930); especially 72–3; 'The Control and Care of Half-caste Children in Queensland', in *The Half-caste Aborigines of North and Central Australia: Suggestions Towards Solving the Problem* (Sydney: Association for the Protection of Native Races, 1930), 7–11; 'The Aborigines: Past and Present Treatment by the State' in *White and Black in Australia*, ed. J.S. Needham (London: National Missionary Council, 1935), 38–62.

Ethnic nationalism and White Australia

Above all else, 'breeding out the colour' sought to maintain White Australia. Sometimes this aspiration was explicit, as in Cecil Cook's statement that his policy offered 'the only instrument of realizing the objective of ... an All White Australia'.³⁹ Often it was implicit, an underlying assumption that ran as *basso continuo* behind the embellishments and complexities of argumentation. Australia was to be white not in a mere metaphorical sense, but physically, tangibly, epidermically white. As a Western Australian advocate of absorption, Dr Cyril Bryant, stated, 'the continued infiltration of white blood will finally stamp out the black colour, which, when all is said and done, is what we object to'.⁴⁰ At least some absorptionists, including Cecil Cook, were astute enough to acknowledge that 'colour', in itself, was trivial, assuming significance only in and through specific socio-cultural circumstances.⁴¹ This in no way diminished his commitment to changing the colour rather than the circumstances. For the socio-cultural circumstance in which whiteness assumed such significance was Australian nationhood itself.

The White Australia imperative is particularly evident in one line of argument pursued by Cook. On several occasions he drew attention to 'the very grave problem' arising as a result of interbreeding between 'half-castes' and 'alien coloured races' (Asians).⁴² The 'multiplication of multicolour humanity by the mating of Halfcastes with alien coloured blood shall be reduced to a minimum', he declared.⁴³ And the most effective way of doing so was to ensure that 'half-caste' women were safely married to White men. Cook was quite explicit about this, stating that part-Aboriginal women 'must be married to men substantially of European origin' in order to control 'the propagation of the hybrid [of] alien coloured' ancestry.⁴⁴ Advertising the virtues of his policy, he explained in his official report for 1934 that the 'success achieved by encouraging the marriage of half-castes to Whites has curtailed the birth rate of hybrids of coloured alien paternity'.⁴⁵ In this rendition, reproductive control was directed primarily at stifling an Asian infusion into the nation, and 'half-castes' were represented as merely the conduits through which Asian 'blood' could flow. Cook's arguments may have been idiosyncratic, but they highlight the fact that his and other

³⁹ Cook to Administrator, NT, 27 June 1933, CRS A659, 40/1/408, NAA.

⁴⁰ Quoted in Patricia Jacobs, 'Science and Veiled Assumptions: Miscegenation in W.A. 1930-1937', *Australian Aboriginal Studies*, no. 2 (1986): 18. See also David Paul, 'A Man of Many Parts': Cyril Phillips Bryan and Western Australian Aboriginal Affairs Policy in the 1930s', in Crotty *et. al.*, 91-9.

⁴¹ Cook, 'Half-caste housing policy', c. February 1932, CRS A452, 52/414, NAA.

⁴² Cook to Administrator, NT, 7 February 1933; and Cook to Administrator, NT, 27 June 1933; both in CRS A659, 40/1/408, NAA.

⁴³ Cook to W. Morley, 28 April 1931, CRS A1, 36/6595, NAA.

⁴⁴ Cook to Administrator, NT, 27 June 1933, CRS A659, 40/1/408, NAA.

⁴⁵ Cook, 'Report of the Chief Protector of Aboriginals', in 'Report on the Administration of the Northern Territory for the year ended 30th June 1934', *Commonwealth Parliamentary Papers*, no. 138, 1934-37, 12.

absorptionist strategies were directed against 'colour'—any colour other than white—rather than against Aboriginality *per se*. Which draws us back to the question of why colour should be so crucial.

The White Australia creed was far more than merely a doctrine of racial exclusion. From Federation, White Australia was a foundation-stone of the new nation, constituting, in effect, its ethnic core. The 'crimson thread of kinship', in Henry Parkes' famous phrase, bound the national community together with tightly knotted fibres of shared descent, culture and sentiment, however fictive those strands may have been. It also linked Australia to its antipodes, for the ethnicity of Australian ethnic nationalism was British.⁴⁶ But this in no way diminished the power of blood kinship as a unifying myth of nationhood. Of course, blood kinship was not the sole source of national cohesion; civic ideals of egalitarianism, democratic rights and social welfare were also potent ingredients of Federation nationalism, as its recent champions have highlighted and even its fiercest critics concede.⁴⁷ However, as Anthony Smith has argued, ethnic and civic nationalisms should not be regarded as mutually opposed types but as complementary dimensions of nationalism, with at some times and places the ethnic elements predominant, at others the civic.⁴⁸ In early twentieth-century Australia, the ethnic dimension loomed large.⁴⁹ The ethnic identifier (whiteness) defined national membership, with civic benefits available only to those meeting the ethnic criteria. Indeed, in a common contemporary conception, whiteness constituted the *precondition* for the flourishing of civic virtues. According to Senator Drake-Brockman in 1920, 'the whole existence of this democracy depends on our maintenance of the great principle of White Australia'.⁵⁰ Myra Willard's spirited academic defence of the White Australia ideal, published three years later, can be read as an amplification of this proposition, that national

46 Douglas Cole, 'The Crimson Thread of Kinship': Ethnic Ideas in Australia, 1870–1914', *Historical Studies* 14, no. 56 (April 1971): 511–25; Peter Cochrane, 'Anglo-Saxonness: Ancestors and Identity', *Communal/Plural* no. 4, (1994): 1–16; Cochrane, 'Britishness in Australia', *Voices* 6, no. 3 (1996–97): 63–74.

47 Robert Birrell, *A Nation of Our Own: Citizenship and Nation-building in Federation Australia* (Melbourne: Longman, 1995), especially 11–13, 251–4; John Hirst, *The Sentimental Nation: The Making of the Australian Commonwealth* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2000); cf Humphrey McQueen, *A New Britannia: An Argument Concerning the Social Origins of Australian Radicalism and Nationalism* (Melbourne: Penguin, rev. edn, 1986), 268; Elaine Thompson, *Fair Enough: Egalitarianism in Australia* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 1994), 46.

48 Anthony Smith, *Nations and Nationalism in a Global Era* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995), 99; Smith, *National Identity* (London: Penguin, 1991), 13; Smith, *The Nation in History: Historiographical Debates about Ethnicity and Nationalism* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 2000), 4, 25–6.

49 Arguably, the general shift of emphasis in Australian nationalism over the course of the twentieth century has been away from the ethnic components toward the civic, though this shift was (and is) never total. Raymond Breton ('From Ethnic to Civic Nationalism: English Canada and Quebec', *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 11, no. 1 (1988): 85–102) has advanced this argument in relation to a comparable settler society, Canada; see also Smith, *Nation in History*, 16.

50 Quoted in Myra Willard, *History of the White Australia Policy* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1923), 211.

cohesion depended on the cultivation of an ethnic solidarity rooted in shared blood, belief and aspiration.⁵¹

As Anthony Smith explains, myths of common descent constitute 'the *sine qua non* of ethnicity', hence of the ethnic component of nationhood.⁵² What matters for ethnic cohesion is not the veracity of claims of shared descent, but the plausibility of such claims, so that the binding power of myth can work on the group. Absorption strove for this plausibility. If all Australians were white, they could be attributed a shared origin, history and descent. Conversely, if a minority were black, this would mark their origins, history and descent as different, discordant. To be brought within the fold of the mythic community of descent, their colour had to be 'bred out'. Indeed, if nationhood be conceived in potently ethnic terms, the incorporation of new members must depend on their shedding all attributes, biological as well as cultural, that could set them apart as an alternative ethnic community. Absorptionists took for granted the dependence of national cohesion on the ties of ethnicity. More than that, they sought to maintain the ethnic constitution that had been founded at Federation. Perversely as it seemed to those who envisaged White Australia as a dogma of racial purity, this ethnic constitution could be preserved only by the diligent pursuit of racial impurity. Complete exclusion was the means for dealing with external threats to the national-ethnic character; radical inclusion provided the solution to internal threats.

However, many—probably most—Australians did regard racial purity as the central and sacrosanct principle of White Australia. The Australian Labor Party objective, to foster 'an Australian sentiment based on the maintenance of racial purity', succinctly expresses this bonding of nationhood to race purity.⁵³ From the other side of party politics, Emily Curtis, Secretary of the Women's Section of the United Country Party, used the same idea to attack the 'monstrous innovation' of biological absorption. She conveyed to the Commonwealth her organisation's resolution:

That, it is greatly to be deplored that the Federal Government is so far lost to the knowledge of our deep rooted sentiments and pride of race, as to attempt to infuse a strain of aboriginal blood into our coming generations.

That, the Women's Organisations of Australia be urged, that, for the race heritage that we hold in trust for the generations to come, for the sanctity of our age old traditions, and for the protection of our growing boys, to combat with all their power this insidious attempt to mingle with the community, women of illegitimate birth, tainted with aboriginal blood, the offspring of men of the lowest human type, many of whom are Asiatics and other foreign nationalities.⁵⁴

⁵¹ Willard, especially chapter 10.

⁵² Smith, *Ethnic Origins*, 24.

⁵³ Quoted in McQueen, 39.

⁵⁴ Curtis to Secretary, Department of the Interior, 19 August 1934. CRS A452, 52/420, NAA.

This was probably the most persistent theme in the many and varied complaints against 'breeding out the colour': far from safeguarding White Australia, absorption would irrevocably corrupt it, polluting the national bloodstream with the dregs of inferior races. The editor of the eugenic journal, *Health and Physical Culture*, endorsed this line, giving it a distinctly eugenicist twist. Immediately after the 1937 Aboriginal Welfare Conference he published a stinging attack on absorption, proclaiming that its consequences could only be profoundly dysgenic, the creation of 'a class of low white trash'.⁵⁵ This was continuous with a long history of Australian eugenicist hostility toward Aboriginal-White intermixing, going back to the movement's nineteenth-century pioneer, Dr Alan Carroll, who never missed an opportunity to inveigh against the 'mongrel' offspring of such unions.⁵⁶

Eugenics?

Although in the 1930s absorption seems to have attracted very little, if any, support from avowed eugenists, many recent scholars have unhesitatingly labelled it 'eugenic'.⁵⁷ Absorptionism and eugenism certainly held some characteristics in common, notably their advocacy of reproductive management as a solution to social problems. But does this alone qualify absorption as in any meaningful sense 'eugenic'? Apart from a shared methodology, did absorptionism also manifest eugenic aspirations? These are not easy questions, for 'eugenics' is a slippery word. Recent historiography has highlighted the diversity of eugenic movements and elasticity of eugenic ideas, their transformations over time and transferability across a vast range of social, cultural, scientific and political settings.⁵⁸ Yet as the leading Australian exponent of this trend toward treating eugenics as flexible discourse rather than fixed strategy—Stephen Garton—has warned, this does not mean that 'eugenics' becomes merely 'a catch-all term' for any and every variety of population management and reproductive intervention. Garton disputes the absorption-eugenicist equation, perhaps too strongly.⁵⁹ Yet

⁵⁵ 'Would You Welcome Marriage with a Half-caste?', *Health and Physical Culture* (1 July 1937), 20-1, 24.

⁵⁶ See Carroll's journal, *The Science of Man*, any issue (it was published monthly between February 1898 and December 1912).

⁵⁷ See for example Patrick Wolfe, *Settler Colonialism and the Transformation of Anthropology: The Politics and Poetics of an Ethnographic Event* (London: Cassell, 1999), 11; Manne, *In Denial*, 39.

⁵⁸ See Frank Dikotter, 'Review Essay: Race Culture: Recent Perspectives on the History of Eugenics', *American Historical Review* 103, no. 2 (April 1998): 467-78; Diane Paul, *Controlling Human Heredity: 1865 to the Present* (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1995); Nancy Stepan, *'The Hour of Eugenics': Race, Gender, and Nation in Latin America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991). For Australian studies in this vein see Michael Roe, *Nine Australian Progressives: Vitalism in Bourgeois Social Thought* (Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 1984); Stephen Garton, 'Sir Charles Mackellar: Psychiatry, Eugenics and Child Welfare in New South Wales, 1900-1914', *Australian Historical Studies* 22, no. 86 (April 1986): 21-34; Garton, 'Sound Minds and Healthy Bodies: Re-considering Eugenics in Australia', *Australian Historical Studies* 26, no. 103 (October 1994): 163-81.

⁵⁹ Stephen Garton, 'Writing Eugenics: A History of Classifying Practices', in Crotty *et. al.*, 11.

there are good grounds for problematising the connection, and doing so may help elucidate the rationales for 'breeding out the colour'.

In one of the few studies that critically appraises, rather than merely assumes, absorption's eugenic credentials, Tony Austin identifies the endorsement of miscegenation as the major point of discord.⁶⁰ But hostility to miscegenation was by no means a defining quality of eugenics. Although promoting race-mixture was a minority taste among eugenicists in the English-speaking world, even in the heartland of racist eugenics, the United States of America, some eugenicists conceded the beneficial results of miscegenation.⁶¹ Moreover, Nancy Stepan has pointed out that 'constructive miscegenation' was a vital and prominent part of Latin American eugenism.⁶² On the face of it, this Latin American eugenism seems closely allied with Australian absorptionism, for it too sought 'progressive whitening' through reproductive management. However, the Latin American context, with immense numbers of mestizos, was very different from the Australian, with its tiny 'half-caste' minority. In addition, the neo-Lamarckianism that Stepan identifies as the intellectual foundations of Latin American eugenism appears to have been entirely absent from Australian absorptionism; insofar as absorptionists invoked any theory of heredity, it was explicitly or implicitly Mendelian.⁶³ More importantly, Australian absorptionism was much more narrowly focused than Latin American 'constructive miscegenation'. While the latter treated changing complexion as one aspect of larger processes of hereditary improvement, absorption took whitening as its primary—indeed virtually sole—goal.

Herein lies absorption's major dissonance with eugenics. Absorption promised little by way of genetic enhancement of the Australian population. 'Breeding out the colour' sought to improve the nation's complexion, not its gene pool. Although absorptionists urged the diffusion of Aboriginal genes throughout the white Australian populace, no one attempted to legitimise absorption on the grounds that this would bring biological benefit to the majority population. Rarely—very rarely—a few absorptionists were bold enough to suggest some positive racial results from the blend. Cecil Cook, for example, in one of his more enthusiastic paeans to absorption, rounded off the list of its virtues with the claim that:

the aboriginal inheritance brings to the hybrid definite qualities of value—intelligence, stamina, resource, high resistance to the influence of tropical environment and the character of pigmentation which even in high dilution will serve to reduce the at present high incidence of Skin Cancer in the blonde European.⁶⁴

⁶⁰ Austin, 106–7, 112–13, 119; Austin nonetheless regards absorption as a eugenic strategy. See also Jacobs, 'Veiled Assumptions', 19, 21.

⁶¹ Daniel Kevles, *In the Name of Eugenics: Genetics and the Uses of Human Heredity* (London: Penguin, 1986), 75, 319; Paul, *Heredity*, 111–14.

⁶² Stepan, especially chapter 5.

⁶³ Tindale, 85–90; Alan Charlton, 'Colour Counts: Norman Tindale and the Mathematics of Race', in Crotty *et al.*, 81–2; Paul, 'Man of Many Parts', 94–5; Jacobs, 'Veiled Assumptions', 18, 20.

⁶⁴ Cook to Administrator, NT, 27 June 1933, CRS A659, 40/1/408, NAA.

However, this comes at the end of a long passage in which other benefits of absorption—saving White Australia, promoting the progress of the Northern Territory and ensuring equal citizenship for all its inhabitants—were given pride of place. Similarly, Norman Tindale suggested that:

the introduction of a low percentage of a primitive Australian strain may provide just that extra range of variation necessary for the ultimate selection and development of a white stock adjusted to the tropical parts of Australia.⁶⁵

Again, however, this was a mere fragment in a larger argument that laid stress on other—especially national—imperatives for the absorption of 'half-castes'. Like other absorptionists, Cook and Tindale were concerned to reassure White Australians that the mixing they advocated would have no detrimental effects on the White race. But the scant and half-hearted suggestions that racial benefit might follow seem to have been mere rhetorical embellishments of arguments whose foundations lay elsewhere.

Nor did absorptionists argue that continual accessions of White 'blood' would improve the physical, moral and mental constitution of part-Aborigines in any respect save one—it would make them whiter. Absorption sought not to make fitter people, but to make people better fit in. Even the theory of Aboriginal-Caucasian race-relatedness, which held some potential for eugenic advocacy, was very seldom used to assert the intrinsically eugenic qualities of the Aboriginal-White 'cross'. Persistently, however, it was invoked to validate the claim that Australians of mixed descent would not 'throw back' to the Aboriginal side of their ancestry, as was alleged to occur in Negro-White crosses. Professor Cleland's statement is typical for its fixation on personal appearance:

The physical characteristics of the Australian aboriginal are not dominant and there are not throw-backs to the original type when individuals with native blood marry whites. An octoroon is almost indistinguishable from a pure-blooded white person.⁶⁶

The crucial point was that Aboriginal ancestry could be hidden. With no risk of embarrassing atavisms—black babies suddenly popping up in white families—Aboriginal genes could be safely diffused throughout the entire (White) Australian population. Provided those genes lacked physically observable manifestations—as long as genotype was not manifest in phenotype—all was well. This assumption, which was axiomatic to the absorptionist position, is difficult to reconcile with eugenicism.

Eradication and incorporation

While many white Australians feared that the concealment of Aboriginal ancestry would facilitate an insidious contamination of the national bloodstream,

⁶⁵ Tindale, 124.

⁶⁶ Cleland to Minister for the Interior, 4 October 1932, Cleland Collection.

others opposed 'breeding out the colour' on quite different grounds. Some humanitarian activists regarded absorption as tantamount to the deliberate eradication of Aborigines. In a 1938 review of the Aboriginal Welfare Conference of the previous year, Secretary of the Association for the Protection of Native Races, Reverend William Morley, asserted that Neville's objective appeared to be the 'absolute extinction of the native race'.⁶⁷ Remarking on the same conference, Tom Wright, Vice-president of the Labor Council of New South Wales, claimed that the statements of Neville, Cook and several others revealed an 'inclination of those in authority ... to aim at the elimination of the aborigines'.⁶⁸ Some years earlier Mary Bennett had claimed that Cecil Cook's 'real policy' was 'the extermination of the unhappy native race'.⁶⁹ Such criticisms prompt consideration of allegations of the attempted genocide of Aboriginal people, recently given prominence by the *Bringing Them Home* report.⁷⁰

Bringing Them Home's broad-brush approach, attempting to portray all Aboriginal policies throughout the first two-thirds of the twentieth century as genocidal, is inept. The questions of whether, when and where Aboriginal policy was motivated by genocidal intent requires much more fine-grained analysis, more rigorous contextualisation and more cautious interpretation. These lie beyond the scope of this article. However, I find Robert Manne's arguments persuasive: genocidal intent was *sometimes* manifest in twentieth-century Aboriginal policy, and that 'sometimes' includes, above all, the schemes of systematic biological absorption pursued by Western Australia and the Northern Territory in the 1930s.⁷¹ Although Manne's arguments are in need of further refinement, his substantive proposition is sound. Advocacy of the complete physical dissolution of the group 'Aborigines' (of any degree of descent), combined with procedures designed to systematically achieve that objective, indicate an intent that is 'genocidal' according to the meaning of the term set out in the 1948 United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide.

Yet the issue becomes more complicated, for while genocidal intent can be discerned, so too can humanitarian intentions. It was a dour, authoritarian and arrogant humanitarianism, but exponents of 'breeding out the colour' nonetheless evinced concern for the welfare of those they sought to whiten.⁷² Neville insisted that 'our coloured people must be helped in spite of themselves'.⁷³ And

⁶⁷ William Morley, 'Review of the Chief Protector's Conference at Canberra, April, 1937: With Comments and Criticisms from the Viewpoint of the A.P.N.R.', *The Aborigines Protector* 1, no. 5 (June 1938): 13-24; see also Morley, 'Association for the Protection of Native Races: Twenty-seventh Annual Report, Year 1937-38', *The Aborigines Protector* 1, no. 6 (January 1939): 22.

⁶⁸ Tom Wright, *New Deal for the Aborigines* (Sydney: Forward Press, 1939), 19.

⁶⁹ Mary Bennett, unpublished manuscript dated 15 September 1934, in A.P. Elkin Papers, box 68, item 1/12/145, University of Sydney Archives.

⁷⁰ *Bringing Them Home*, especially 270-5.

⁷¹ Robert Manne, 'The Stolen Generations', *Quadrant* 42, no. 1-2 (January-February 1998): 61-3; *In Denial*, 35-40.

⁷² See Jacobs, *Mister Neville*; in 'Veiled Assumptions', 21. Jacobs remarks on a diminution of Neville's 'compassion' as the 30s wore on. See also Rowley, 28.

⁷³ Quoted in Haebich, 317.

by 'help' he clearly meant not merely provision of economic, educational and social welfare, but eradication of the perceived root cause of their ostracism and disadvantage: the 'colour' that set them apart from the national community. Whiteness, in this conception, was the greatest boon that could be conferred upon a people, for their individual well-being as well as for the sake of the nation as a whole. The combination of humanitarian solicitude with White Australian arrogance is nicely illustrated in Cecil Cook's plea to an audience of Northern Territory unionists, pastoralists and missionaries:

Is there one of you who will dispute the necessity to give [the] Halfcaste the opportunity to evolve into a white man? ... It is absolutely essential that he should be given an opportunity of evolving, more or less into a white man.⁷⁴

In Cook's social Darwinist conception, there could be no better pathway of social betterment than the one that led to whiteness; that, after all, was the pathway of human progress. Equally, there could be no other pathway to national membership.

Humanitarian concern and genocidal intent might seem incongruous, even incompatible, associates. However, the UN definition of genocide allows for their coexistence, in Article II(e) which specifies 'forcibly transferring children of the group to another group' as one of the acts that may constitute genocide, if 'committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such'. Conceivably, forcible transfers could be carried out in the perceived best interests of the child, even where destruction of the group of which they were erstwhile members is intended. This provision in the UN definition certainly complicates and adds moral ambiguities to the concept of genocide. Nonetheless, the practices and intentions of 'breeding out the colour', at least in its more totalising forms, would seem to come within its ambit. Regardless of individual circumstance, children were transferred out of the Aboriginal or 'half-caste' group, since the group itself was considered dysfunctional, an impediment to the life-chances of its individual members. And their transference was but the first step in a process that, via reproductive management, would culminate in the physical demise of the group itself.

Conclusion

If my exposition of the genocidal intent of 'breeding out the colour' seems somewhat convoluted, it is partly because the UN definition of 'genocide' is tortuous, partly because biological absorption was a less than coherent policy. Genocidal intent can be identified, at least in the effusions of its more enthusiastic exponents, such as Neville's exhortation to 'forget that there ever were any aborigines in Australia'. But Neville's plea also calls to mind Ernest

⁷⁴ Notes on Conference regarding payment of Halfcastes and Aboriginals in Country Districts, Darwin, 9-13 May 1930, CRS A1, 38/329, NAA.

Renan's famous remark about nationhood being founded as much on selective forgetting as on remembrance of the past.⁷⁵ Not all absorptionists were as dedicated to 'forgetting' as Neville; but all were committed to erasing the most conspicuous reminder of discordant national origins: the 'colour' that distinguished the descendants of Australia's Indigenous peoples. The fact that 'colour' could assume such significance as to become the focal point of policy is indicative of the potency of the strand of ethnic nationalism that threaded through early twentieth-century Australia.

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⁷⁵ Ernest Renan, 'What is a Nation?' (1882) in *Becoming National*, ed. Geoff Eley and Ronald Suny (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 44–5. See also Benedict Anderson's insightful commentary on Renan and 'forgetting'; *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, rev. edn, 1991), 199–201.