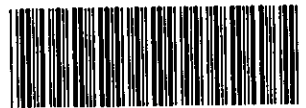


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Witnesses from the Conference Floor: Oral History and the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders

Sue Taffe

On 13 February 1958 a small group of experienced political activists travelled to Adelaide from all mainland states for what would be an historic meeting. The travellers were greeted by Dr Charles Duguid, president of the Aborigines Advancement League of South Australia and well known for his humanitarian work among the Pitjantjatara and his opposition to plans to develop a rocket range in the Central Australian Reserve. Some of those invited to this weekend meeting knew each other personally while others had corresponded for some years. In all, twelve delegates representing nine Aboriginal rights and welfare leagues attended this meeting and another thirteen observers looked on. Four Aboriginal people, comprising Pastor Doug Nicholls, from the Aboriginal Advancement League of Victoria, Jeff Barnes, representing the Aboriginal Advancement League of South Australia, Herbert Groves, from the Aboriginal-Australian Fellowship in Sydney, and Bill Onus, an observer from Melbourne, were in attendance. The representatives from these state-based organisations agreed to form a new body, the Federal Council for Aboriginal Advancement (FCAA) with the aim of helping 'the Aboriginal people of Australia to become self-reliant, self-supporting members of the community'.¹

Almost forty years after this meeting I had the opportunity to interview former members of this organisation. This article is a discussion of four 'stories' from the many told in the thirty tapes and transcripts of these interviews in order to explore some of the ways that oral material can provide valuable historical evidence.² Archives in Melbourne, Sydney, Canberra, Brisbane and Adelaide have provided the more traditional sources of information about FCAA; the opportunity to talk to some 'who were there', although fraught with hazards for the inexperienced, adds another dimension to our attempts at understanding the recent past. The central question I am asking is: what new understandings of the Federal Council come from these interviews? Or to put it another way: what can be learned from the oral record which cannot be learned from a reading of written archives?

Jessie Street disseminated the idea of a united effort to pressure the Commonwealth Government to take greater responsibility for Aboriginal Australians. Street, an internationalist and left wing feminist had, among those in each state already working in Aboriginal Advancement Leagues, argued that while the states controlled Aboriginal people, their rights would continue to be denied and budgets would not be sufficient to deal with the disadvantage; the legal status of those defined as 'Aboriginal' — with the definition varied from state to state — would continue to change on crossing a state border.³ From 1958 to 1962 the organisation grew in numbers and reputation among Aboriginal and Islander people who, when state

secretary positions were created in 1962, filled all of these positions.⁴ A committee system was established to develop strategies to implement the five principles of the Federal Council. These were 'equal citizenship rights with other Australian citizens'; an adequate standard of living equivalent to that expected by other Australians; 'equal pay for equal work and the same industrial protection as for other Australians'; free and compulsory education for detribalised Aborigines; and 'the absolute retention of all remaining native reserves, with native communal or individual ownership'.⁵ In 1964 Torres Strait Islanders were recognised as a separate group and the name of the organisation changed to the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders, more popularly known as FCAATSI. A national campaign was launched in 1962 to press for constitutional amendments designed to stimulate a more active involvement by the Commonwealth in Aboriginal affairs in 1962. This was ultimately successful when on 27 May 1967 Australians voted at a referendum to amend two sections of the Australian Constitution. The most significant of these two changes gave the Australian Parliament power to 'make laws for the peace, order and good government of the Commonwealth with respect to ... the people of any race for whom it is deemed necessary to make special laws'. (Prior to this amendment the exclusion 'other than the Aboriginal race in any state' followed 'people of any race').⁶ For the first decade of its life the organisation was run from Melbourne; following the success of the 1967 referendum and the resignation of the long-serving general secretary Stan Davey, however Sydney became the administrative centre with Faith Bandler, daughter of a South Sea Islander, the acting general secretary.

While the Federal Council consisted of an executive and a committee system where much of the work was carried out, for most people working for the causes of the then-named Aboriginal advancement movement, their experience of the Federal Council was of the annual conferences. Delegates from up to sixty-seven affiliated organisations and interested observers from around the country attended these conferences, held in Canberra from 1963 to 1970, coming in decrepit buses and old cars, by hitching a ride or by travelling second class on the train. Alick Jackomos, the Victorian state secretary recalled:

Ken Colbung used to come across the Nullabor every year in an old broken down car, you know with his wife and children. And the pack rack had all, I don't know, had a tent and all food and blankets. And that poor devil would come across the Nullabor every year. But it wasn't only Ken Colbung. They were coming down from Queensland. I think Kenny Brindle would get the footballers' bus from Sydney and bring a mob down from there.⁷

By 1965 the number attending had swollen to 220, and in 1970, when FCAATSI split over the issue of who should control the organisation, total attendance was 361. Indigenous attendance numbers also grew. The original four had increased to sixty-five in 1965, and by 1970 124 Aboriginal and Islander delegates and observers represented all Australian states and territories. This is particularly significant, given the cost of travel for those living far away from Canberra and the fact that although indigenous people made up only about 2 per cent of the total population, one third of those at the 1970 conference were indigenous.⁸

Publications about FCAATSI are for the most part either personal histories or academic analyses focusing on the organisation's high and low points. Faith Bandler's *Turning the Tide: A personal history of the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders*, was published in 1989. Bandler was a member of the executive in several different roles from 1963 to 1973. As the subtitle indicates, a personal rather than a broad focus on the organisation is evident. Joe McGinness, the Aboriginal president of the organisation from 1961 to its demise in 1978, wrote *Son of Alyandabu: My Fight for Aboriginal Rights*, published in 1991. Approximately half of this work is concerned with the Federal Council in the years from 1961 to 1970. More recently, Jack Horner, an executive member of the Federal Council for six years, has completed a history of FCAATSI but this has not yet been published.⁹

Historians have also turned their attention to the high and low points of the organisation. Bain Attwood and Andrew Markus have explored the 'mythologising' of the referendum campaign in two articles and in *The 1967 Referendum or When the Aborigines Didn't Get the Vote*.¹⁰ They argue that the referendum is the subject of powerful myths. At one extreme these myths are expressed as inaccurate statements such as that 'Aborigines got the vote in 1967' (hence their title). Vaguer forms of this myth attribute the referendum with bestowing citizens' rights rather than the specific outcome, the removal of two negative references to Aborigines in the Constitution. Peter Read in an article published in 1990 entitled "'Cheeky, Insolent and Anti-White": the split in the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders- Easter 1970' has analysed the annual conference at which the membership split over the question of indigenous control.¹¹ Read has argued that the split was about two opposing views of what FCAATSI's purpose should be in 1970. One was that the organisation's strength lay in its multi-racial composition and that this shared power reflected the goal of greater civil rights for Aboriginal Australians so that they could be recognised as equals in the Australian community. The opposing view was that by 1970, Aboriginal and Islander people were ready to take control of their own organisation and that the multi-racial form was no longer appropriate: indigenous people themselves needed to establish what they wanted and this was to be based not so much on a shared humanity but on cultural difference and rights coming from their indigeneity. This tension was resolved, to some extent, when those holding the latter position separated to form an indigenous-controlled organisation, the National Tribal Council.

The tapes of those interviewed for the FCAATSI Oral History Project tell a story with which I am familiar through my archival research. It is a story of hard work and commitment by a group of dedicated people fighting for equal wages in the cattle industry, the extension of social service benefits to Aboriginal people, the referendum campaign and the campaign for land rights. It is a rich resource, providing opportunities for the historian to consider the spoken contribution to our understanding of FCAATSI, a contribution that must be approached differently to written primary source material. It is not possible in the space of this article to add to the already extensive debate concerning methodological and epistemological investigations of what has been called 'oral history'. My analysis is informed by the contributions of Alessandro Portelli, Luisa Passerini and the Popular Memory Group; this is especially the case with regard to the perceived need to develop an approach to oral material

which is not simply literal and factual, but which takes account of the cultural framework of memories and which recognises the influence of the present in which the memory is recounted.¹²

Land Narratives

Of the many stories contained on the tapes I have chosen four which illustrate diversely the value of oral evidence to convey opinions, experiences and information not recorded in the documentary account. Three of these relate to the issue of land, its control and ownership and its meaning for Aboriginal people. From 1963 onwards Federal Council members supported, in various ways, indigenous attempts to establish some control over their traditional lands. These stories indicate some of the forms of this partnership.

Marj Broadbent, a process worker, member of the Communist Party of Australia and convener of FCAATSI's fundraising committee tells the first story. She speaks of Aboriginal responses to a presentation at the 1965 annual FCAATSI conference. The conference reports note a presentation by Dr Barrie Pittock entitled 'The place of indigenous populations in Australia'. Pittock had just returned from a post-doctoral appointment in the US and he told listeners that the principle recognising that the original occupants of the United States did have rights to land was incorporated into US law in 1787. He contrasted this situation with the Australian position arguing that the principle of Aboriginal entitlement to land should be established.¹³ While this presentation was well received by some, Marj Broadbent provides another picture:¹⁴

At one conference one academic was giving a big report on his Churchill scholarship to the United States of America. And he went on and on about the great treaties — modern treaties — that had been signed between the indigenous American people (or the native American people) and the United States government. And the big mining companies how they would — indigenous people were getting dividends and had tourist centres and they had rights to the land and so on. And there was this wonderful picture being painted of the benevolence of Yankee imperialism of their own native Americans. And I thought this was a load of rubbish!

This was *his* view of what he'd seen. So I got up and ... asked him, 'how is it that the American government is so benevolent to the native Americans when the Afro-Americans (oh we called them Negroes in those days) when the Negroes were out on the streets, only wanting the right to vote and the troops were there with dogs, cattle prodders, the National Guard — and killing them and disappearing them? How come? This was such a difference between — the policy between one people and the other?'

Well then the speaker had to spend the next twenty minutes undoing what he'd said. 'Oh I meant this', and, 'Oh no no — well the emphasis — perhaps I put the wrong emphasis on this or that'. So then when it was over, the session ended and I was just sitting there gathering up my bits of paper and what have you, and I noticed that there was quite a number of black hands just touch my shoulder or squeeze my arm or touch my hand. And I thought, 'oh they probably think that the question was a good one'.¹⁵

In this example Broadbent's memories of the Aboriginal response to her questioning of the speaker make known an undocumented part of the story. The essence of her story is that she understood Pittock to be applauding treaties that had been signed by the US government and indigenous American tribes. Her own understanding of 'Yankee imperialism' led her to reject this response. And when she left the hall Aboriginal people in attendance affirmed her stance. Broadbent's own Marxist polarities — troops, dogs, cattle prodders and the National Guard versus Afro-Americans and native Americans — meant that she saw the situation described by Pittock in class terms of exploiter and exploited. Those who patted her on the back and touched her arm most likely identified with Broadbent as a worker fighting for better wages and conditions for Aboriginal Australians, rather than with Pittock who was presenting an argument for a radical approach to land, by describing the processes which had taken place in the USA. This story highlights a tension within the Federal Council, between intellectuals and other members. Three years after this conference Aboriginal people would be calling for the Federal Council to organise a land rights campaign, but in 1965 there was no unanimity regarding the urgency of such action.

On the Gove peninsula, however, the issue of land, its ownership and its control was of pressing importance. The following story communicates the intensity of experience which oral history can convey. The issue of land was first brought to the attention of FCAA delegates at the 1963 conference when they heard a telegram from Reverend Edgar Wells, superintendent of the Yirrkala Mission, alerting them to the planned excision of 140 square miles from the Arnhem Land reserve to permit development of a large scale bauxite mining operation. In response to Yolngu tribal leaders from this area Gordon Bryant, MHR and vice-president of FCAA, successfully moved in federal parliament 'that a select committee be appointed to inquire into the grievances of certain Aboriginal people of Yirrkala relating to the excision of land'.¹⁶ This marked a turning point as the Yirrkala people, with some key supporters, began to use political and legal processes to fight for their land. In his interview for the FCAATSI Project, Stan Davey, General Secretary of the Federal Council, pondered how to explain to people living in the undeveloped harmony of the Gove Peninsula what 'mining' might mean for their community.

One guy [Daymbalipu Mununggurr, a Djapu clan leader from the Yirrkala mission] we had at the [1966] Canberra conference, and I said, 'You'd better come down and have a look at our open cut mining at Yallourn. Come down and see the open cut mining at Yallourn. That's what you're going to face when you go back to your open cut with the bauxite mining — which is opening up. And he got permission to come down with us and we hosted him down to Melbourne and (laughs) sent him down to Yallourn and said, 'Well that's what your country's going to look like!' Oh he was just shocked. And unfortunately he was not strong enough to do anything about it when he went back.¹⁷

Words, tone, pause, rueful laugh, even the offering, unsought, of this memory tell us about Davey, his relationship with the Yolngu, and his commitment to their cause. Arranging a trip for Daymbalipu to the Yallourn mines shows Davey's gift of imagination in realising that the Yolngu could have no idea of the effects of open cut mining on land. The action of arranging such a trip conveys his dedication to providing

traditional landholders of the Yirrkala Reserve with real information about the consequences of the Special Mineral Leases which were signed in March 1963 between the Government and Gove Bauxite Corporation Limited. It shows the depth of Davey's concern for the Yolngu, but most of all it throws into relief the enormity of the government's lack of consideration of the consequences for the local people. Significantly the local people were not consulted before the Minister for Territories signed a lease which would change their lands for ever. Davey's despairing 'that's what your country's going to look like' is an acknowledgement that it was their country in a deep and abiding sense which could not be changed by leases. His 'he was shocked' conveys the awful inevitability, the power imbalance of the Yolngu and their fragile land-centred lifestyle pitted against a mining company driven by financial reward and provided with leases by the Australian Government.¹⁸

These two contributions are illustrations of Paul Thompson's 'witnesses from the underclasses'. Those who indicated their approval of Marj Broadbent's challenge and Daymbalipu from Arnhem Land are given a voice through these taped interviews, and their existence provides us with information we would not otherwise have.

Referendum narratives: literal stories or symbolic representations?

The third narrative concerns the 1967 referendum and illustrates an approach to oral history, which recognises the role of story in conveying meaning. The stories people tell about this event can be better understood when the social context of the remembered events is taken into account. A consideration of memories of the referendum by former FCAATSI referendum campaigners will illustrate this point.

For many involved in pressing for a referendum, whether in the Aboriginal-Australian Fellowship campaign in 1957, the national petition campaign of 1962/3 or the campaign for a 'yes' vote in 1967, the referendum came to represent a high point of cross-cultural co-operation.²⁴ Alick Jackomos, who had been involved with what he calls 'the Aboriginal movement' since the 1930s, chose to share a story of gathering signatures for the national petition campaign:

And, Doug [Nicholls] and I — I was employed by the Advancement League then as a field officer. And we used to go up to Smith Street, Collingwood with a little card table outside of old Foy & Gibson's. It's not there anymore. And Doug'd be yelling out, 'give Aboriginals citizenship rights!' And he'd be dragging people. And Doug was like chewing gum to anyone because if he put his hand on them they'd come right to the table — you know. He could mesmerise them, Doug and get them there. And it was Doug's job to lead 'em to the table, and there's me sitting at the table getting people to sign. But we signed those petitions there but we also had a good spot outside the Collingwood football ground on home matches — outside the Collingwood members' stand.

Now Collingwood footballers are black and white one-eyed. Normally they'd just rush into the grandstand to get their seat. But this particular day Doug Nicholls, again as they were walkin' in — and everybody knew Doug. I mean Doug was a household name. He was better known than Henry Bolte who was the premier at the time. Soon as they see Doug, they couldn't resist Doug. So he leads 'em to the table and we'd get these petitions. And we got a lot of petitions signed. And so did all the other workers in Victoria.²⁵

This sense of purpose and co-operation is repeated in other stories told by Joe McGinness, speaking about addressing a church congregation in Launceston, Rodney Hall doorknocking in Brisbane, and Daphne Millward recalling 'we had a terrific team of workers, and that included Aboriginal people and non-Aboriginal people', preparing leaflets at the Aborigines Advancement League in Melbourne.²⁶ It reflects the referendum as a co-operative movement, or 'black and white together' as one of the campaign slogans said which could be effectively promoted to the people.²⁷ Rodney Hall, convener of the Publicity Committee, recalled it as 'a great focal point for us all', and General Secretary Stan Davey considered that the objectives of the campaign were ones to which everyone could agree. Mona Fox of the NSW Aboriginal-Australian Fellowship remembered that 'every Fellowship member felt it was our main job'.²⁸

'Give Aboriginals citizenship rights!' was both a campaign strategy and a shorthand expression to point out that some state legislation, notably in Queensland, still deprived Aboriginal people of basic rights such as award wages, the right to choose their place of abode and rights relating to the upbringing of their children.²⁹ The 1967 vote came at the end of a decade of agitation for two Federal Council principles — 'equal citizenship rights' and 'equal pay for equal work'. In 1959 the exclusionary provisions of the Social Services Act which limited Aboriginal people's rights to social service benefits had been repealed. The 1962 Electoral Act had enfranchised Aboriginal and Islander people at federal elections, although in Queensland the majority of Aboriginal people were still excluded from voting at state elections.³⁰ In 1966 the Arbitration and Conciliation Commission had ruled in favour of the principle of equal pay for equal work for those in the pastoral industry. State laws, particularly in Queensland and Western Australia, however, continued to limit the rights of those defined as Aboriginal, and were the reason for continued agitation for constitutional change to empower the Commonwealth to make laws 'for the people of any race, for whom it is deemed necessary to make special laws'.³¹

FCAATSI activists who spoke about the referendum explained their support for it as well as expressing their feelings about its broad significance. Stan Davey argued that the referendum had to happen because the Aboriginal people 'were so restricted and degraded by the state legislation'. Len Fox, from the Aboriginal-Australian Fellowship, recalled that 'it needed to be a national problem where the national parliament could discuss it'. And Faith Bandler remarked that in pushing for the referendum 'what we had in mind was the cash!' referring to access to federal finances.³² The documentary record of the arguments for a referendum supports these memories. Compared to these factual statements, expressions of feelings about the result of the referendum were effusive. Bandler saw the referendum as 'a tremendous achievement', one which she 'truly believed ... would solve many problems', as a result of availability of federal funding.³³ Daphne Millward, a Melbourne Aboriginal campaigner recalled 'we had a big party afterwards at the Doug Nicholls Centre ... people were falling out the doors. And everybody was just so pleased that this was the beginning of getting recognition for Aboriginal people'. And Jack Horner, later to become General Secretary, saw the referendum as 'the big thing. It still is a very big thing in history ... The referendum made a great change in the Aboriginal way of thinking. They realised they were accepted at last'.³⁴ These observations indicate an awareness both of the particular value of the referendum and its symbolic

significance. For FCAATSI activists the referendum seems to have come to represent the civil rights struggles of a decade as well as their insistence on the need for greater Commonwealth responsibility.

Some understanding of the broader claims for the referendum can be better understood if we consider events following May 1967. A month after the referendum there was a move against General Secretary, Stan Davey, which led to his resignation. As well, two high-profile Aboriginal executive members, Kath Walker (later Oodgeroo Noonuccal) and Charles Perkins, resigned amidst public allegations that FCAATSI was not properly representative of the Aboriginal people.³⁵ Melbourne/Sydney rivalries and the election of Faith Bandler as acting General Secretary meant that Sydney became the executive centre. From 1968 on, tensions between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal members became more overt and by late 1969 it was clear to those following Aboriginal politics in Brisbane and Melbourne that the 1970 annual conference would see a move for Aboriginal control of the organisation.³⁶ Jack Horner, Sydney-based General Secretary at this time, remembered this as 'a confusing time'. Another Sydney executive member referred to it as a 'revolution' and wondered about 'the existence of a clique'.³⁷ Bandler, the very successful NSW referendum campaign co-ordinator, spoke strongly against the motions for Aboriginal control at the 1970 meeting. When interviewed about the 1970 meeting, Faith Bandler asserted tersely that she 'didn't have time to get involved in the Black politics of the thing' but felt it was wrong that FCAATSI 'should be demolished in order to get an all-Black organisation going'.³⁸ This was in marked contrast to her expansiveness regarding the referendum campaigns.

In *The 1967 Referendum, or When Aborigines Didn't Get the Vote* Bain Attwood and Andrew Markus refer to the referendum as 'the subject of powerful myths'.³⁹ They describe Bandler's hyperbolic comment that the referendum was 'the greatest victory the Aborigines have had or ever will have' as 'a comforting fiction'.⁴⁰ Why has the referendum taken on such significance in her memory? Certainly, it is important to note, as Attwood and Markus point out, that the result of the referendum was, specifically, two changes to the Australian constitution. But the memorialising of an event, and the accompanying distortion,⁴¹ tell us something about the needs of those doing the commemorating, and lead to a consideration of the relationship between the time remembered and subsequent events. The fact that 90.77 per cent of voters supported amending the two references to Aboriginal people when the campaign had linked a 'yes' vote to broader ideas expressed as 'citizen rights' indicated wide support for Aboriginal Australians. The campaign appealed to the Australian sense of a 'fair go'.⁴²

Peter Read, in writing about the tumultuous 1970 FCAATSI conference reminds us that 'the Civil Rights for Aborigines movement and the brief post-war period of cooperation with the whites ended together'.⁴³ For Bandler, deeply involved in FCAATSI work and reluctant to acknowledge challenges to the power structure, the memory of the referendum offers affirmation of the achievements of the civil rights movement. 'It goes to show what can be done if you truly believe that what you're doing is the right thing. And I truly believed that the referendum would solve many problems', she explained.⁴⁴

The referendum comes to stand as an emblematic memory of that brief cooperative period when FCAATSI's civil rights agenda was largely unquestioned and

inter-racial cooperation at both executive and general meetings could usually be expected. From 1968, the politics of racial identity, the land rights movement, and the development of Aboriginal organisations led to non-Aboriginal FCAATSI members questioning their role in the Aboriginal movement. Framed thus by the apathy of the immediate post-war period and the assertive race politics of the 1970s, the referendum has come to symbolise the civil rights work of the 1960s which culminated in a 90.77 per cent yes vote — an attractive climax to a story which could be shown to end happily, if it ended here.

The final narrative provides a view, like the Broadbent account, of the opinion of ordinary people. Dr H C Coombs, Chairman of the Council for Aboriginal Affairs, tells us of moves to transfer ownership of Willowra Station to the local Aboriginal people, at the wish of the white pastoralist.¹⁹ Joyce Clague, a Yagal woman from Ullagundi Island on the northern NSW coast, lived in Alice Springs with her public servant husband, and represented Northern Territory people in FCAATSI. She tells her story accompanied by gesture, laughter, and an expressive lively style conveying a meeting of two cultures when she instructs Martin (Stumpy) Jambadjimba in applying for a loan.²⁰

So he [Martin Jambadjimba] said to myself, 'oh I'd like to go and, you know get this station from this fella'. I said, 'yeah, time might come that you can get this station from him. So anyhow one day we heard that the station was up for sale. We heard it in Alice Springs and these fellas said, 'Hey, you know that Edgar Parkinson place? It's up for sale!'

Just out of Alice Spring, Willowra Station. This Edgar Parkinsons — and I said, 'look okay you could get — you can try and get it. What you can see is the Loan Commission. You can go to the Loan Commission'. Now we wrote, we wrote that first Loan Commissions [application] for the people. And we said to them, 'we'll make an application to the government and they will only charge you so much percentage for it, and you will be able to sort of pay it back slowly, every — but you'll have to pay it back. It's a loan. It's not a — they don't give it to you'. And he said, 'alright. Alright we'll do that'. So we wrote and I got them to sign and everything — wrote this letter, oh, real good letter you know and sent it away to Canberra. And then I said to them, 'you know, you fellas can hurry this on, you know. You can hurry this on if you save two dollars at a time out of your pension, out of the child endowment. And if you work you give a little bit more because- and you fellas'll have this soon'. So I was asleep one night and so was Colin. We heard this — and this was, oh must've been a year later — And I hear all this noise at the back there and talkin' and singin' out 'Oi! Oi!' And here's, this (two and three o'clock in the morning this was, you know) These fellas just came from Willowra Station and they woke us up. Colin out there, you know, and making them a cuppa tea, cookin' bacon and egg, toast and everything. And I'm sayin', 'what's these fellas, you know, think?'

And I get out and I say, 'what you fellas makin' all this noise for and everything?' And they said, 'oh we've brought you this money'. And I said, 'what money?' They had it in little sugar bag, little sugar bag that full. There was — and all these — the pensioners, the people who was working, some of the people who — child endowment, were givin' the (chuckles) children money too. All in this little sugar bag. Thirty-two thousand something, thirty-two thousand, but I know *fifty-eight cents* was in that (laughing) And they said (laughs) — they said to me, 'now you

keep it here for us and we'll bring you some more later on'. And I said — well I couldn't sleep! I couldn't sleep. I'd never seen money like that before!!! (laughing) It was under my bed and I couldn't sleep. And they said, 'no, don't put it in the bank! Don't put it in the bank!' And I said, 'you fellas staying here. You sleepin' here tonight. You sleepin here tonight because you fellas gunna put that in the bank!' 'No no no! We don't trust those fellas with the — you know — with the bank and everything'. And I said, 'yeah, but you know if you put that money in now it'll create more money'. They said, 'no'. But it did. So I said, 'all you fellas sign — sign — sign for that thing'. No-one — and that's how they, they had — Now that cattle station was quite a big cattle station, and they paid that off. Now they own about four.²¹

Joyce Clague's story provides us with some idea of what initiatives such as the Aboriginal Loan Commission actually meant to those Aboriginal people who successfully applied to it. Coombs has outlined these events from a different perspective:

In mid-1968 Edgar Parkinson, the owner of the Willowra leasehold cattle property, suggested to H Giese, then Director of Social Welfare in the Northern Territory administration, that the government might buy the Willowra lease for the resident Aboriginal community ... At the suggestion of the council [Council for Aboriginal Affairs], Parkinson made a firm offer to sell and a Willowra Aboriginal, Stumpy Martin, wrote on behalf of the Aboriginal residents requesting a loan to purchase the property.²²

Here is the whitefella executive summary: a report of the outcomes of interactions between Territory and Federal Government with all of its subplots of power play and opposing political positions.²³ Coombs is intent on showing us some of the difficulties he was up against leading a reformist Council for Aboriginal Affairs which was regarded suspiciously by the Northern Territory administration, the Federal Department of the Interior and often even the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs. The account by Clague gives us the point of view of those most affected by the establishment of the Aboriginal Loans Commission. It communicates a people's reaction to the possibility of gaining control of their own lands again, of the excitement and sense of anticipation such hope generated and of the work which must have been involved in gathering the deposit. This account shows us the other, fuller and at times more accurate, side of the story. We are given an insight into the communal composition of the letter — 'real good letter' — to the Loans Commission, a different picture to Coombs' account of a letter written by Stumpy Martin 'on behalf of the Aboriginal residents'. Are the details of this story remembered accurately? Did Colin Clague serve them bacon and eggs in the early hours of the morning? Was the deposit \$32,000? These details do not matter. This anecdote, told with fluency and liveliness, is clearly about an actual event. And the telling of the event captures the excitement of this achievement and expresses the coming together of two vastly different cultures. Clague's final comment 'now that cattle station was quite a big cattle station, and they paid that off. Now they own about four' expresses belief and pride. The oral record provides us with a picture of the kinds of transactions involved at ground level when, in response to government initiative, people plan, and organise, and gain some control over their lives.

Conclusion

These four stories range from short anecdotes to more developed narratives. The three related to land were provided spontaneously. The other story was elicited in response to a question about working towards the referendum. Alessandro Portelli's observation that 'oral history tells us less about events than about their meaning' is worth keeping in mind here.⁴⁵ These stories are about past events. They also concern 'unfinished business' — relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians, with regard to land and, in the fourth narrative, the right to be different.

The three stories concerning land demonstrate what oral evidence can add to the information provided by traditional archival sources. The hazards of what has been called 'oral history' are now acknowledged. Critics have commented on the unreliability of memory and observed that memories are shaped by our meaning-making attempts as we relate past to present and seek to understand both our earlier behaviour and the behaviour of others in the light of subsequent events.⁴⁶ On the other hand, A P Thomson has reminded us 'reality is complex and many-sided, and it is a primary merit of oral history that to a much greater extent than most sources it allows the original multiplicity of standpoints to be recreated'.⁴⁷ In putting the case for the use of oral sources, Thomson argues that written sources 'reflect the standpoint of authority'. The use of oral history means that 'witnesses can now also be called from the underclasses', thus providing a fairer, more inclusive and many-sided construction of the past.⁴⁸ Without these interviews the response of those Aboriginal people at the 1965 conference as reported by Marj Broadbent would not exist. We would be unaware of Stan Davey's imaginative efforts to convey the idea of 'mining' and we would know nothing of the effort and excitement of those who applied to buy Willowra Station.

A literal reading of the fourth narrative, concerning the referendum, will fail to recognise that this 'event' has become a symbol, standing for more than just changes to the wording of the Constitution. John Murphy has suggested in 'The Voice of Memory: . History, Autobiography and Oral Memory' that metaphor is 'the dominant mode in which oral history functions'. This he sees as 'one key to a cultural reading of how the past is remembered and presented'. The question 'what was it like?', he argues, invites a metaphorical description which encapsulates and orders experience. Such an answer, according to Murphy, 'can then be expected to reveal much of both individual experience and of wider social institutions'.⁴⁹ As I have shown, it is productive to consider the referendum memories in the FCAATSI Oral History Project in the broader context of the co-operative civil rights work which culminated with the 1967 victory. The divisiveness following the referendum which intensified into the split at the 1970 FCAATSI conference further heightens the referendum's symbolic potential. This one event has come to have a cultural significance which is more than the separate parts of constitutional amendment, legislative changes and a shift in social attitudes. When the referendum is read as a symbol of what we now see as an unusual period of co-operative activism between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians the stories told about this event make more sense.

The oral testimony of those who contributed to the FCAATSI Oral History Project provides anecdotes and reflections, insights into the characters and personalities of some of the protagonists and, inevitably, memories of a past influenced by subsequent

events. Such reminiscences, when being considered as historical evidence, require a different approach to that used with documents, but their consideration makes possible a better understanding of the complex movement for social reform embodied in the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders.

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Introduction

Elizabeth Ruinard and Elspeth Tilley

- 1 W Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, Act 3, scene 2.
- 2 Learning for Life: Review of Higher Education Financing and Policy, 1998.
- 3 'As Good As It Gets; Work in Progress', Postgraduate Conference, Department of English, University of Queensland, August, 1999.
- 4 Published in the University of Queensland English Postgraduates' Society journal, *Postscript* 98.2, 1999, p 3.
- 5 John Gunders (ed.), Call for papers, *Postscript*, August, 1999.
- 6 The 'arrogant' slur was reported by a UQ EPS member on the EPS email list in mid-2000. Selections from the list pertaining to funding cuts, faculty restructuring, etc., can be viewed at (http://www.uq.edu.au/eps/bulletin_board/). Our examples are from the University of Queensland because that is where our familiarity lies, but such debates are in no way exclusive to this institution. A quick search of postgraduate websites uncovers other groups at other universities waging almost identical battles, for example at (<http://www.monash.edu.au/students/mpa/hotissues/cutstoarts.htm>) and (<http://www.arts.monash.edu.au/history/postgraduate/newsletter/april2000.htm>).
- 7 Acknowledgement is due to John Gunders, Miriam Lo and the *Postscript* editorial collective for discussions during which these ideas were crystallised.

Witnesses from the Conference Floor: Oral History and the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders

Sue Taffe

- 1 Report of the Adelaide Conference, 14-16 February 1958, Barry Christophers, personal papers.
- 2 From 1996 to 1997, with the aid of grants from the Australia Foundation for Culture and the Humanities, the Reichstein Foundation and the Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies I organised the FCAATSI Oral History Project. This was conducted as a joint venture with Koori Arts Collective, Melbourne. The project was supported by the Monash University Department of History. It was approved of by the University's Standing Committee on Ethics in Research on Humans. Leanne Miller, appointed by Koori Arts Collective, and I interviewed twenty-eight people closely associated with FCAATSI. Tapes and transcripts of these interviews are held in the ALATSIS Library, Canberra. Alistair Harris interviewed William Wentworth, the first Federal Minister for Aboriginal Affairs as a part of this project. I conducted two further interviews, not included in this collection during 1998. These were with Stan Pelczynski, treasurer from 1973 to 1975, and Josie Briggs, assistant secretary 1973 to 1975.
- 3 See Tim Rowse, 'Assimilation and After' in A W Martin, Ann Curthoys & Tim Rowse (eds), *Australians from 1939*, Sydney, 1988 for a well illustrated comparative study of state definitions of Aboriginality and the range of controls imposed on Aboriginal people in the 1960s.
- 4 Tasmania was the only state which did not have its own state secretary though in 1970 Ron Thomas was appointed as the Tasmanian state secretary.
- 5 Constitution of the Federal Council for Aboriginal Advancement, FCAATSI Papers, MS 299Y603, Mitchell Library, Sydney.
- 6 The other Constitutional change was the repeal of section 127 which read: 'In reckoning the numbers of the people of the Commonwealth, or of a State or other part of the Commonwealth, aboriginal natives shall not be counted'. The Australian Constitution, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, 1991.
- 7 Alick Jackomos, FCAATSI Oral History Project, (hereafter referred to as the FCAATSI Project) 12 December 1996, p 10.
- 8 Reports and resolution of the 8th annual conference of the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders, Council for Aboriginal Rights, MS 12913, box 10/7; report of the 13th annual conference, 1970, Canberra, McGinness papers, Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies.
- 9 Faith Bandler, *Turning the Tide: A Personal History of the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders*, Canberra, Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, 1989; Joe McGinness, *Son of Alyandabu: My Fight for Aboriginal Rights*, St Lucia, UQP, 1991.
- 10 This work was published by Aboriginal Studies Press in 1997 to coincide with the thirtieth

- anniversary of the referendum. See also the following by the same authors: '(The) 1967 (referendum) and all that: narrative and myth, Aborigines and Australia, *Australian Historical Studies*, no 111, October 1998; and 'Representation matters: The 1967 referendum and citizenship' in N Peterson & W Sanders (eds), *Citizenship and Indigenous Australians: Changing Conceptions and Possibilities*, Cambridge UK, Cambridge University Press, 1998.
- 11 This article is published in *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, 1990, vol 36, no 1, pp 73-83.
 - 12 See Alessandro Portelli, 'What makes oral history different', Luisa Passerini, 'Work ideology and consensus under Italian Fascism', Popular Memory Group, 'Popular memory: theory, politics, method in R Perks and A Thomson (eds), *The Oral History Reader*, London, Routledge, 1998.
 - 13 See Recordings of the 8th Annual Conference on Aboriginal Affairs, 16-18 April 1965, OH 417, J D Somerville Oral History Collection, Mortlock Library, South Australia.
 - 14 Pauline Pickford, secretary of the Council for Aboriginal Rights, Victoria found the Pittock report interesting and suggested that systematic work gathering information about the way other colonising settler societies approached the land question with regard to indigenous populations should commence. See Pauline Pickford, 'Summary of the 8th annual conference of the Federal Council for Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders', Council for Aboriginal Rights, Victoria, MS 12913, State Library of Victoria.
 - 15 Marjorie Broadbent, FCAATSI Project, 17 January 1997, p 4.
 - 16 Report from the select committee on grievances of Yirrkala Aborigines, Arnhem Land Reserve, part 1 — report and minutes of proceedings, 29 October 1963, Government of the Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, 1963.
 - 17 Stan Davey, FCAATSI Project, 29 November 1996, p 9.
 - 18 A letter from Davey to R Ward details arrangements for Daymbalipu's trip south, 19 April 1966, Gordon Bryant papers, MS 8256, box 171, National Library of Australia, Canberra.
 - 19 See H C Coombs, *Kulinma: Listening to Aboriginal Australians*, ANU Press, Canberra, 1978.
 - 20 See Ian Palmer, *Buying Back the Land: Organisational Struggle and the Aboriginal Land Fund Commission*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, 1988, for a description and analysis of this.
 - 21 Joyce Clague, FCAATSI Project, 8 November 1996, p 10.
 - 22 Coombs, *Kulinma*, pp 177-178.
 - 23 See T. Rowse, *Obligated to be Difficult: Nugget Coombs' Legacy in Indigenous Affairs*, Cambridge, CUP, 2000; H C Coombs, *Kulinma: Listening to Aboriginal Australians*, Canberra, ANU Press, 1978 for analyses of these power relationships.
 - 24 Petition campaigns were held in 1957, 1958, 1962-3. Some petitions continued to be presented to Federal parliament from 1964 to 1966. The Vote 'Yes' campaign took place in April and May 1967.
 - 25 Alick Jackomos interview, FCAATSI Project, 12 December 1996. More than 100,000 signatures were collected during the national petition campaign which ran from October 1962 to June 1963.
 - 26 Rodney Hall, 6 November 1996; Stan Davey, 29 November 1996; Mona Fox, 9 November 1996 Daphne Millward, 12 December 1996, FCAATSI Project.
 - 27 Federal Council strategists used the call for 'citizenship' as a propagandist strategy, simplifying a complex issue, which comprised both legislative realities in the various state jurisdictions as well as the social reality, experienced by Aboriginal people at the time. In Attwood and Markus' analysis of the 1967 FCAATSI vote 'yes' campaign this distinction is not made sufficiently clear. For example they argue that the FCAATSI publicity campaign failed to 'open to scrutiny the possibility that laws pertaining to civil rights and welfare benefits could change and yet have little impact on the lives of Aborigines, and so it failed to consider more complex explanations of the bases for the disadvantaged position of Aboriginal people'. Such a statement disregards the need in any political campaign to simplify issues in order to elicit support. There is much evidence in the files of FCAATSI and its Victorian affiliate, the Council for Aboriginal Rights, that FCAATSI strategists were well aware of the fact that changing laws was only a part of the answer.
 - 28 Mona Fox, 9 November 1996, FCAATSI Project.
 - 29 See John Chesterman and Brian Galligan, *Citizens without Rights: Aborigines and Australian Citizenship*, Cambridge, CUP, 1997, chapter 6 for a discussion of the path to civil rights. The authors illustrate on page 167, the contradictory nature of citizenship for Aboriginal Australians by citing the case of Mr Sandy McDonald who wrote to the Attorney-General, Garfield Barwick, pointing out that in the Northern Territory he was regarded as a citizen but when he crossed the border into Western Australia he was regarded as an Aboriginal. Barwick's opinion was that: Mr McDonald is an Australian citizen wherever he may be in Australia and this citizenship is not lost

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- on his passing from one State or Territory to another. But this does not mean that he is necessarily entitled to all the rights enjoyable by a non-Aboriginal Australian citizen throughout Australia. Cited in Chesterman and Galligan, p 167.
- 30 In 1961 the right to vote in Queensland was held by only 19 700 'non-controlled half bloods' out of an official Aboriginal population of 46,234. *Ibid.*, p 171.
- 31 See J Chesterman and B Galligan, chapter 6.
- 32 Stan Davey, 29 November 1996; Len Fox, 9 November 1996; Faith Bandler, 7 November 1996, FCAATSI Project.
- 33 Faith Bandler, FCAATSI Project, 7 November 1996.
- 34 Bandler, Millward 12 December 1996; Jack Horner, 5 December 1996.
- 35 'Three Native Leaders Resign', *Australian*, 23 August 1967. Walker later withdrew her resignation. Perkins' resignation was public and critical of FCAATSI: 'I don't believe the Federal executive is properly representative of the Aboriginal people'. *Australian*, 31 August 1967.
- 36 In September 1969 the Victorian Aborigines Advancement League began a process leading to full Aboriginal control of the organisation, see Victorian Aborigines Advancement League, *Victims or Victors?*, Hyland House, South Yarra, 1985, chapter 7. In January FCAATSI General Secretary, Jack Horner, received a letter from the newly formed Brisbane Tribal Council stating that they would not affiliate with the Federal Council 'unless voting rights be vested in the Aboriginal and Island people and them only'. Pittock personal papers.
- 37 Jack Horner, 5 December 1996; Alan Duncan, 9 November 1996, FCAATSI Project.
- 38 Faith Bandler, 7 November 1996, FCAATSI Project.
- 39 Attwood and Markus, *The 1967 Referendum*, p xi. They explore similar questions in two other articles: '(The) 1967 (Referendum) and all that: narrative and myth, Aborigines and Australia'; and 'Representation matters: the 1967 referendum and citizenship'.
- 40 *ibid.*, p 66.
- 41 See Alistair Thomson, 'Putting popular memory theory into practice in Australia', in Perks and Thomson, *The Oral History Reader*, for a study of the interactions between Anzac legend stereotypes and the experiences of one first world war veteran.
- 42 See Scott Bennett, 'The 1967 referendum', *Australian Aboriginal Studies*, no 2, 1985, for an analysis of the vote. See also Attwood and Markus, *The 1967 Referendum*, chapter 5.
- 43 Read, "'Cheeky, insolent and anti-White": the split in the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders — Easter 1970', p 80.
- 44 Bandler, 7 November 1996, FCAATSI Project.
- 45 Portelli, 'What makes oral history different'.
- 46 See Heather Goodall 'Colonialism and catastrophe: contested memories of nuclear testing and measles epidemics at Ernabella' in Kate Darian-Smith and Paula Hamilton (eds), *Memory and History in Twentieth Century Australia*, OUP, Oxford, 1994, pp 55-76 for a fascinating study of this phenomenon.
- 47 Paul Thompson, 'The voice of the past: oral history' (extract from work of the same name, Oxford, OUP, 1988, 2nd ed.), in Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (eds), *The Oral History Reader*, London, Routledge, 1998, p 24.
- 48 *ibid.*
- 49 John Murphy, 'The Voice of Memory: History, Autobiography and Oral Memory', *Australian Historical Studies*, no 22, vol 87, October 1986, pp 157-75.

Regulating Koori Marriages: The 1886 Victorian Aborigines Protection Act
Kathering Ellinghaus

- 1 'Race' is now seen to be an outdated concept which is based on spurious assumptions about the cultural, physical and intellectual differences between groups of people. Despite the fact that some scholars believe that history written using the word 'race' can only be backward-looking in terms of social justice, I use possibly offensive words like 'race', and 'half caste' in this paper in the firm belief that it is impossible to write about this period of history without using the terminology of the day. For information about laws prohibiting interracial marriage in the United States of America, see Peggy Pascoe, 'Miscegenation Law, Court Cases, and Ideologies of "Race" in Twentieth Century America', *Journal of American History*, vol 83 no 1, 1996, pp 44-69; David H Fowler, *Northern Attitudes Towards Interracial Marriage: Legislation and Public Opinion in the Middle*