

The Central Aborigines Reserve

CHARLES DUGUID

Presidential Address, 21st October, 1957

Aborigines Advancement League of South Australia, Incorporated

During 1957 four reports have been written on conditions in the Warburton Reserve in Western Australia. These are conflicting, and as a result questions have been asked as to what is happening in the Central Aborigines Reserve.

In 1939 I travelled through the Reserve in a north-westerly direction from the eastern end of the Musgrave Ranges in South Australia, through the intervening mountains in the Northern Territory and along the Petermann Ranges to the Western Australian border. In June, 1957, I went from east to west through the Musgrave, Mann and Tomkinson Ranges to the Blackstone and neighbouring ranges in Western Australia. These two routes have been the highways of the aborigines in the Central Reserve in their food-gathering and hunting economy.

For thousands of years before the Central Reserve was gazetted for Australian aborigines, less than 40 years ago (Northern Territory 1920, South Australia 1921, Western Australia 1937), men, women and children lived in the vicinity of the many mountain ranges in that area. Knowing nothing of political boundaries, they roamed unmolested from place to place. The Reserve was, roughly, 65,000 square miles in extent, made up of more or less equal portions from the Northern Territory, South Australia and Western Australia.

Until ten years ago very few white men had entered the Reserve, and then either by permit or illegally. In 1946 the Federal Government took control of a large tract of country to form a Rocket Range. This begins at Woomera, crosses the Central Aborigines Reserve, and is to continue across Western

Australia in a north-westerly direction to the Ninety-mile Beach between Broome and Port Headland. But, according to the "News," Adelaide, 28/6/57, a large section of the Reserve in South Australia previously under the Defence Act has been resumed as part of the Reserve. But in the years of occupation vital changes were effected in the tribal lands.

In 1956 the Federal Government took over more land from South Australia at Maralinga for the exploding of atomic bombs. "The cost of establishing Maralinga has been met by the United Kingdom Government." (Mr. Howard Beale, Minister of Supply, "Hansard" 14/5/57). Also in 1956 the Federal Government appropriated land in Western Australia inside the Aborigines Reserve for the building of a meteorological station. "The capital cost of setting up the Giles Meteorological Station has also been met by the United Kingdom Government." (Mr. Howard Beale, Minister of Supply, "Hansard" 14/5/57).

In 1956, following in the wake of prospectors admitted by permit to the Reserve, mining operations were begun in both the South Australian and Western Australian section of the Central Reserve. Woomera, headquarters of the Rocket Range, is at Pimba, 100 miles north-west of Port Augusta, and 430 miles east of the Reserve. In the Woomera country there are no tribal aborigines, but not infrequently natives pass through it.

At Maralinga the proving area is, roughly, 50 miles north of Watson Siding on the East-West Railway, and 150 miles from the south-east corner of the Aborigines Reserve. The Ooldea Reserve for Aborigines was alongside what is now Maralinga, but in 1954 the aborigines from there were compulsorily moved by the South Australian Government to a place 80 miles south. In the dry area between Maralinga and the Central Reserve aborigines do not live, but they sometimes pass through it.

According to the "Advertiser," Adelaide, November 16, 1946, inter alia, the British and the Australian Governments are together responsible for the defence projects. And in the House of Commons, 16/4/56, it was stated that in the Estimates submitted by the Ministry of Supply for the year 1957-58, £1,640,000 was included to the Australian Government for joint Anglo-Australian guided weapons projects. For the mining operations in the Central Aborigines Reserve the Governments of South Australia and Western Australia are responsible.

It is clear, therefore, that responsibility for the sudden and irrevocable upset of the tribal aborigines in the Reserve must be shared by all those four Governments. On 31/1/57, the British House of Commons made it clear it was willing to accept its share of the responsibility for interference to the aborigines' way of life, but the Federal Government of Australia still maintains no harm has been done. "The question of

compensation does not arise, as there has been no interference with the aboriginal way of living." (Mr. Howard Beale, Minister for Supply, "Hansard" 14/5/57).

Having been the initiator in the founding of the Ernabella Mission on the eastern boundary of the Reserve, and having officially travelled through the Reserve and knowing many of its people, I tried from July, 1946, to prevent the Central Aborigines Reserve becoming a range for rocket testing. In an address at the Melbourne Town Hall on 31/3/47, I stated that if roads were to run through the Reserve, buildings were to be erected on it, and mining prospectors and companies were to be allowed to operate within the Reserve the tribal life of our aborigines there would be disrupted. I felt unable to accept the statement of the then Minister for Defence (Mr. J. J. Dedman) in the House of Representatives 6/3/47. "No roads will be constructed in the Reserve," and his opinion that interference with the habits of the aborigines and areas of special significance to them could be controlled by patrol officers. Until 1956 there was only one patrol officer to investigate the conditions of the aborigines throughout the vast area west of Woomera and in the Reserve. In 1956 a second officer, a young man with no previous experience or knowledge of the bush country, was appointed to act in Western Australia. It is an utter impossibility for two men efficiently to patrol such an area, particularly as tribal aborigines are always on the move, and can keep out of sight if they wish.

What is the state of affairs in the central Reserve today? The old trackless bush is crossed by graded roads on which motor cars and vehicles can travel at high speed—on camels in the Reserve in 1939 our party covered only 12-20 miles per day.

Aborigines must come on these roads from time to time, be curious about them, be bewildered at the traffic, and native women perhaps be accosted by white men. The Minister for Defence (Mr. J. J. Dedman) told the House of Representatives (7/3/47), "The Guided Projectiles Committee considers that danger to aborigines from undesirable contacts can best be controlled by a careful selection of all personnel employed." There can be no guarantee on human relationships in isolated places. Moreover, the Reserve is now connected by road to the North-South Railway. The buildings, too, have come, the most important of which is the modern meteorological station in the centre of the Rawlinson Ranges. In the "Mail," Adelaide, 28/7/56, the Minister for the Interior (Mr. R. Fairhall) is reported as saying, "The purpose of this 'desert' observatory is twofold—to provide an essential service for atomic and weapon trials at Maralinga and Woomera, and to fill in one of the big gaps in Australia's network of meteorological stations." But there was no need to plant it in the Reserve set aside for the last of our tribal aborigines. Not only is it in the Reserve, but

it is situated right alongside one of the best meeting-grounds of the tribal people, and within five miles of Sladen Waters, a permanent watersoak.

To show how this significant country with its game and vegetable supplies has been radically changed, I again quote the Minister for the Interior, speaking as before on 28/7/56, "With tractors, trucks, and heavy earthmoving machines for months now men from the Department of Supply and Works have been engaged in a race against the clock to build this new modern meteorological observatory. The men in this remote station (Giles Observatory) will be well catered for. A graded road to Finke, nearly 500 miles away on the North-South Railway line, has been made, and an airstrip laid down near the camp, so that a regular supply of fresh fruit can be flown in, and speedy contact maintained with the outer world." The staff have every comfort, even air-conditioning, but the Minister completely ignores the fact that this modern installation and its accessories will have a serious effect on the way of life of the naked nomads of the Rawlinson Ranges. No fresh fruit for the aborigines!

The mining operations I envisaged in 1947 began in 1956. In the South Australian section of the Central Aborigines Reserve 1,000 square miles have been leased to the South-West Mining Co., and in the Western Australian section 7,000 square miles have been excised from the Reserve for the workings of the same company. The "News," Adelaide, 18/6/56, stated that International Nickel of Canada holds a 51 per cent. interest in the company. The Pitjantjatjara people, of necessity, travel back and forth along the mountain ranges that stretch east and west across the whole width of the Reserve. The route is an essential highway to them, because it is in the vicinity of the ranges where water, game and vegetable food is available—there is none in the sandhills—and it is along that highway mining is taking place.

At present scientific investigation and prospecting only are taking place. Aerial photography is going on over a vast area, so perfected that on development of the films it is possible to detect likely nickel-bearing rock. Then from the headquarters at Blackstone and Mount Davies land rovers spread out like the spokes of a wheel carrying prospectors to the new areas. Further, it is freely admitted that if commercial ore is found there will be a great influx of miners to the area. The Governments of Western Australia and South Australia have given orders that at the present time there is to be no intercourse of any kind between the white miners and the aborigines, but this does not alter the fact that part of their natural hunting grounds have been taken over for mining.

The change that has taken place in the South Australian section of the Central Reserve can be gauged from what appears in the report of the Aborigines Protection Board for the year

ended 30th June, 1956: "During the year a considerable number of persons has been permitted to enter this Reserve, thus reversing the original policy of the board. The South-West Mining Company are prospecting, investigating and, to some extent, developing in connection with the nickel bearing rock in the Mount Davies area. A graded road has been constructed as a necessity in an area least likely to affect the aborigines in the Reserve. This road was later improved by the Weapons Research Establishment who, in turn, requested permission to enter the Reserve in order that a meteorological research station should be established in Western Australia in connection with atomic tests and other matters of vital importance. It thus became necessary for a considerable number of Weapons Research Establishment personnel to enter that portion of the Reserve."

Between defence projects — this includes the Giles Observatory — and commercial enterprise, the tribal life of the aborigines in their home country is in process of being destroyed. They are losing cohesion and in a generation will have ceased to exist, except as oddments here and there, without any hold on life, unless something is done at once. No Government has yet made any suggestion as to how the tribal aborigines of the Reserve are to be helped to meet the new situation.

In May, 1956, at the Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in South Australia, I stated (Blue Book Minute 96) that a new approach must be made to the tribal aborigines in the Reserve, that a settlement of some kind should be established in the western part of the Reserve to help the natives face the new conditions forced upon them. The Assembly unanimously agreed to pass the request to the Federal Board of Missions for investigation. Speaking at a public meeting in Melbourne (5/2/57) reported by the "Herald," Melbourne, 6/2/57, I asked that to provide such a settlement £200,000 should be set aside by the Governments responsible for the critical dilemma of the people in what we believed was formerly their sacrosanct reserve. Regarded as compensation this is only a token sum. Security of food and water must be guaranteed the aborigines in the Reserve, the standards of health and sanitation of our civilisation must be explained to them, and they must be introduced to a new means of livelihood. Further, their age-long dependence on religion must be respected and guided into new channels.

In my opinion, the responsibility for bringing these changes about must be shared by Church and State. But it is the method of bringing the settlement into being that matters. I recommend the same provisos as were laid down by me in the founding of the Ernabella Mission Station just outside the eastern border of the Reserve.

There must be respect for native customs; members of the white staff must be trained persons in their own sphere, and they must learn the native language thoroughly; education should be conducted primarily in the native tongue; there should be no compulsion in religion, education or anything else; and responsibility should be passed to the natives whenever they are willing and able to take it.

In this new settlement there must be a modern school with a Government-trained teacher assisted after a few years by able native former pupils. A hospital and a trained nurse will be needed, and here again former pupils can be trained to help. Suitable homes for the white staff must be built, but for some years the tribal aborigines will be happier in well-made wurlies or native shelters. There must be no separation of children from parents.

Cattle or sheep breeding or both, under an experienced pastoralist, is essential, and if mining develops in the neighbourhood, properly supervised employment of aborigines in that sphere will follow. Employment of some kind must be available to the aborigines as soon as the settlement is under way, and workers must be paid, not only in food and clothing, but also in cash. There must be a well-stocked cash store to enable the natives to learn the use of money. A modern wireless machine must be provided for contact with the outside world, and with the Flying Doctor, and an airstrip must be constructed.

It is useless starting with anything short of the best if advancement of the aborigines is to be achieved. The British Government, the Federal Government of Australia, and the Governments of South Australia and Western Australia must all join to ensure the future development of the people in the Central Reserve whose territory they have invaded. But they must act quickly or it will be too late to redeem a situation fraught with tragedy for the natives and shame to ourselves.

No one can deny that changes brought about by Government and commercial enterprises in the Central Aborigines Reserve in recent years have disturbed the balance with nature achieved by the aborigines of Australia over thousands of years, and that further disturbance is certain. The days of food-gathering and hunting are nearly over, and as we are the cause of the sudden change, it is our bounden duty to introduce these first Australians to a more settled existence in which they can be as self-supporting and self-reliant as they were in earlier days.