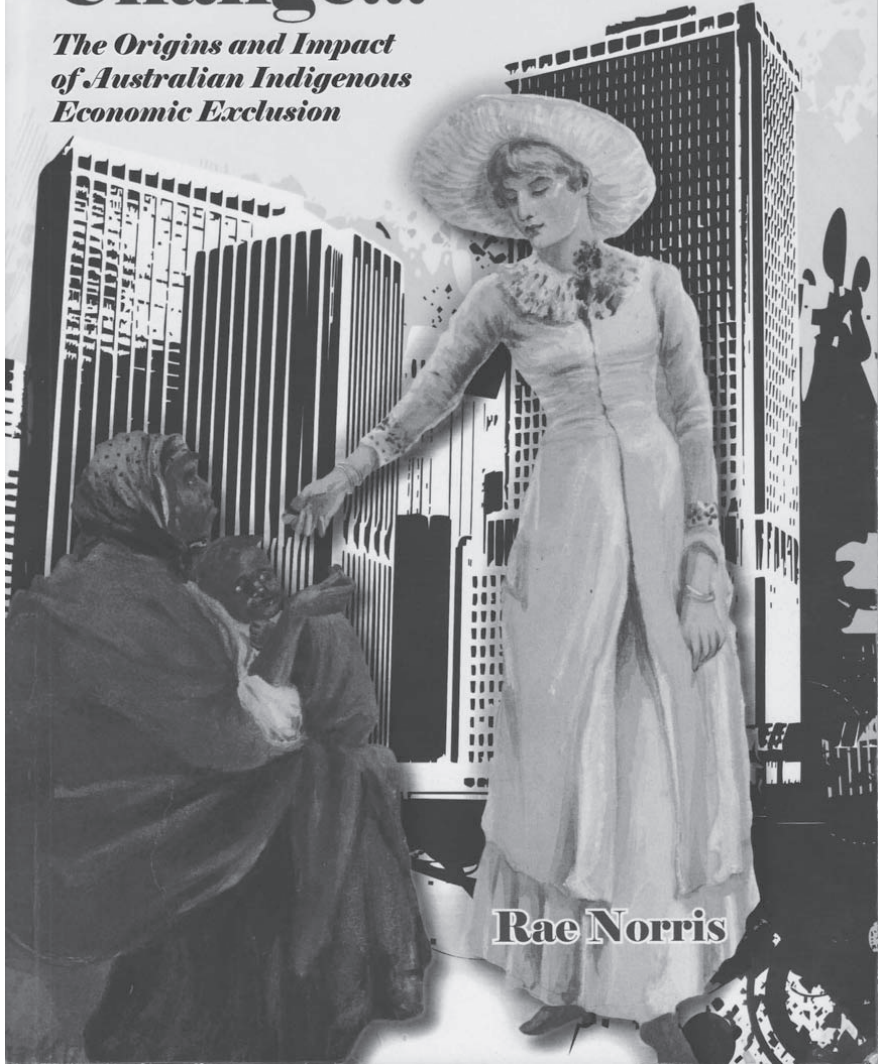


# The More Things Change...

*The Origins and Impact  
of Australian Indigenous  
Economic Exclusion*



## THE MORE THINGS CHANGE... RAE NORRIS

Reviewed by Nicole Watson\*

I have often thought that it is historians rather than lawyers who draft the most powerful indictments against laws and policies imposed on Aboriginal people. It is historians who force us to hear the poignant testimonies of the Aboriginal men and women who fought against bureaucracies in order to keep their families together and maintain a semblance of dignity. It is historians who cast light on the past, in a sometimes futile attempt to bring clarity to the present.

In her book, *The More Things Change...*, Rae Norris discusses the evolution of the ideas that have underpinned laws and policies imposed on Aboriginal people since the beginning of colonisation. As I read this book, it struck me that while the language has evolved over the past two centuries, the fundamental ideas have remained virtually unchanged. Norris' tone is dispassionate and her analysis is meticulous, both of which serve to make her book a powerful tool for critics of contemporary attempts by governments to regulate Aboriginal people.

As Norris powerfully demonstrates, the belief that Aboriginal people are inherently inferior to Europeans is one of the constants of our shared history. Early Europeans considered that Aboriginal people were frozen in a state of savagery. Aboriginal ways of traversing their country and the absence of obvious signs of agriculture fueled myths of 'idle natives'. Such sentiments were expressed by Captain Watkin Tench in 1789, when he wrote that 'All savages hate toil and place happiness in inaction.'<sup>1</sup>

One of Norris' strengths is her ability to expose the historical roots of contemporary policy approaches so lucidly. One of the underlying themes of Norris's book is that Aboriginal law and policy has always been guided by a belief that Aboriginal people require intervention for 'their own good'. As Norris tells us, such interventions have often taken the form of preparation for entry into the lowest levels of the labour force.

One early intervention that Norris refers to was Governor Macquarie's Native Institution, established in 1814. Macquarie's vision was for Aboriginal boys to be taught manual labour and Aboriginal girls to be schooled in domestic arts. The first students were recruited as a consequence of a feast day held, 'at least partly for the purpose of acquiring children from their semi-drunk fathers.'<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Rae Norris, *The More Things Change...* (Post Pressed, 2010) 64.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid 72.

Macquarie's other methods of soliciting students included bribery and even capture. Unsurprisingly, the Native Institution failed because Aboriginal parents were not prepared to relinquish their children.

By the 1840s Aboriginal people had been absorbed into the colonial workforce, but they were still concentrated at lower levels. A labour shortage in South Australia saw Aboriginal people fill new positions, such as blacksmiths, but they remained expendable and liable to be replaced by white labour. Likewise, the payment of wages to Aboriginal workers was the exception rather than the rule.

As Norris tells us, exploitative labour practices were commonly justified by reference to notions of inherent inferiority. Money only rendered Aboriginal people vulnerable to temptations such as alcohol, making rations a preferable alternative. Such arguments would be later used by those opposed to the payment of equal wages to Aboriginal workers in the northern pastoral industry. As I was reading these passages in Norris' book, I reflected on the stories of Aboriginal workers engaged in the \$672 million Strategic Indigenous Housing and Infrastructure Program. While SIHIP has been a windfall for contractors and bureaucrats, many Aboriginal workers are receiving only Centrelink payments, with the added humiliation of income management. Like the interventions of old, such measures are apparently for the benefit of the workers and their families.

At the apex of such beliefs is the view that Aboriginal culture has no intrinsic value. But in spite of various attempts to coerce Aboriginal people into assimilation, we have consistently made a rational choice to maintain our own culture. This resilience however, is rarely celebrated outside of Aboriginal communities and on occasion, has been used to justify grinding poverty. This hypocrisy is encapsulated by Norris towards the end of her book:

... the essence of the problem is that deeply held prejudices have blinkered our vision. We have held tenaciously, if unconsciously, to beliefs in Aboriginal inferiority and their need to become more like us. As long as Aboriginal Australians maintain a separate cultural identity and refuse to succumb fully to white dominance, we remain willing to accept that they deserve the disadvantage which they continue to suffer.<sup>3</sup>

Norris argues that the first step forward is respect for Aboriginal people and their culture. It is an argument that any rational person, aware of the history contained in this important book, would support.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid 180-181.