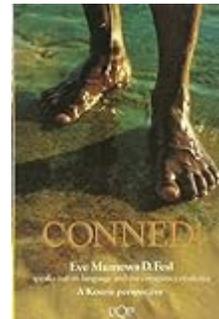


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Wayne Coolwell. *My Kind of People: Achievement, Identity and Aboriginality.* St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1993. ix + 154 pp. AU\$14.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7022-2543-7.

Eve Mumewa D. Fesl. *Conned!* St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1993. 265 pp. AU\$18.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7022-2497-3.



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Both of these books were published in the same year by the University of Queensland Press as part of its Black Australian Writers series. They are authored by southern Queensland-born Murriss and both are passionately concerned about identity and aboriginality.

However, here the similarities end. Coolwell's book is directed at a wide, popular audience. Its emphasis on black achievement appears to be intended for both black and white readers. Eve Fesl's *Conned!* is a difficult book to appraise.

Fesl's primary concern is to defend Australian languages. Her book presents a strong case for the right of Kooris to be taught in their own languages and for the need for more resources to be directed at preserving and enhancing as much of Australia's linguistic traditions as possible. The problems of educating Koori children in English instead of their own languages and of white resistance to Koori attempts to control their own curricula are well-argued with the specialist insight of a person who, as she describes herself, is two-ways strong, that is a member of the Gubbi-Gubbi clan and a professionally-

trained linguist.

These crucial issues are addressed directly only in the last three chapters. Chapters one to five are about the reasons for the decline and loss of so many Australian languages. Rather than a precise historical explanation, the chapters provide a general account of the destruction of traditional Aboriginal society which of course also resulted in the tragic loss of many Australian languages.

Fesl's is a highly political history of the invasion and settlement of Australia from the Koori point of view. The promotion of a counter-view of their history as one of oppression and persecution has been an important tool for many non-European peoples in their struggles. The Irish transmission of their sense of oppression and persecution, for example, helped build ethnic consciousness and inspired political resistance across generations and across national borders. The construction of a Koori version of Australian history for these reasons is essential to the modern movement and as a political document this text is commendable. Fesl has presented a very readable overview of the invasion and settlement of Koori lands

around the country.

However, it is unlikely to be an account that will be well-received by historians. At times she bases her reconstruction on questionable secondary sources (p.69) and at other times applies narrow interpretations to documents which are not read in their historical context (p.125). Fesl paints an unrelenting view of white invasionary social forces, and although she acknowledges different categories of whites she is justifiably unconcerned about differentiating between well intentioned settlers and nasty violent invaders.

The result is a history in which all Aboriginal people are cast as victims and even when they heroically resist they still succumb to white control and domination and survive only to become slaves. The shortcomings of Fesl's historical chapters are most apparent in her explanation of the rise of the land rights movement in the 1960s, which appears in her book without reference to earlier Aboriginal initiatives and is simply explained as the result of overseas influence.

The book is crafted for a broad Koori audience; but will all Aboriginal Australians accept being cast as slaves and as victims? Positive Koori interpretations of the history of the cattle industry, for example, Fesl dismisses rather than accept as pointing to the need to consider relations between Aboriginal people and non- Aboriginal people in their true historical complexity.

On turning to *My Kind of People* it is clear that many Kooris do not identify with Fesl's approach. Wayne Coolwell has interviewed twelve Aboriginal high achievers, whose interests and success have taken them around the world and to positions of public prominence at home. Coolwell's book is also political, but he seeks to appeal to Aboriginal pride and to challenge white stereotypes of Aboriginal failure and hopelessness.

The twelve biographical pieces in *My Kind of People* include artists, professionals, activists and sports people. It is an important collection which challenges stereotypical images of Kooris and includes individuals from urban, poor rural and traditional backgrounds. Coolwell emphasises the naivety of stereotyping Aborigines by following his interview with the inwardly-looking Gordon Bennett, an artist and Moet Fellowship holder now living in France, with the candid and open Mark Ella, the former rugby union international player who, at the time of

the interview, living and coaching in Milan.

The contributors share many of the concerns raised by Eve Fesl, in particular the burden of history, the importance of Aboriginal self-determination, and white inability to comprehend the hurt and pain of everyday discrimination which Aboriginal live with. However, as the portraits disclose, there is no one Koori political position. For example, in contrast to Fesl's account, the actor Ernie Dingo who grew up on a cattle station in Western Australia recalled his childhood with warmth (p.88). More pointedly, the TV presenter and journalist, Rhoda Roberts rejects the victim mentality.

To be Aboriginal you've got to be blacker than black, you've got to be a victim to be Aboriginal, you've got to be hit by your man, cause only then you're an Aboriginal woman. Where is this mentality coming from? We have to question it (p.73). Even the role of Aboriginal languages is disputed. Shirley Nirrurranydji, a bilingual Yolgnu principal of a community school in Arnhem Land defended her decision to teach in English to Coolwell, It's so vital. If I, or some of the others, go to Darwin, everything is written in English, everything (p.149). Noel Pearson, political activist and representative of Cape York Land Council argues for national land rights but is sceptical about Aboriginal sovereignty (p.45). Stan Grant, the journalist and presenter of a national current affairs program who grew up around western New South Wales while his father took labouring jobs, is doubtful about the efficacy of land rights and of any treaty (p.116).

Other contributors include the dancer Linda Bonson, teacher and volunteer abroad Wayne Costelloe who now lives in Thailand, opera singer Maroochy Barambah who, like Eve Fesl, is a member of the Gubbi-Gubbi and grew up at Cherbourg mission, and singer-song writer Archie Roach. As the Nyunga medical doctor Sandra Eades remarked in her interview,

'We're emerging. We're a people taking control of our destiny.' (p.39) Koori writers are at last reaching wider audiences and both *Conned!* and *My Kind of People* provide interesting insights into Koori political debates and cultural directions.

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