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The Australian Aborigines' Struggle Against Authority: An Historical Perspective on Government, Military, and a Corrupted Christianity in Jack Davis' *No Sugar*

by

Debra Bruch[1]

Since 1788, the Australian Aborigine people have been in contact with Europeans. Unfortunately, much of that contact has resulted in human injustice which continues today in the forms of cultural divisiveness, social prejudice, economic imbalance, miscommunication, and negative attitudes. Today's Aboriginal writers address these problems by revealing them in their writings as part of their daily life and cultural heritage. As Kevin Gilbert maintained during the First National Conference of Aboriginal Writers in 1983, Aboriginal playwrights, novelists, and poets feel called to present the evidence of their true situation, (i.e., cultural divisiveness, social prejudice, economic imbalance, miscommunication, and negative attitudes).[2] Yet, "presenting the evidence" angers white people and aggravates the problems between the two cultures. Gilbert says that:

> In attempting to present the evidence we are furiously attacked by white Australians and white converts, whatever their color, as "Going back two hundred years...the past is finished...!" Yet, cut off a man's leg, kill his mother, rape his land, psychologically attack and keep him in a powerless position each day--does it not live on in the mind of the victim? Does it not continue to scar and affect the thinking? Deny it, but it still exists?[3]

For the most part, Aborigines seem to believe that white Australians are inflexibly reluctant to face their own historical heritage. And, for the most part, white Australians often are reluctant to accept history from the Aborigines' point of view. While Gilbert's outcry seems extreme, he and other Aboriginal writers genuinely regard Australian history as distorted in favor of white colonizers.[4] And since history's injustices have a direct connection to today's problems, Aboriginal writers maintain that white Australians cannot help but continue to be deceived about Aborigines. To the Aborigine, because history has distorted today's perceptions and because the media and government continue to keep them in ignorance, white people know very little about the Aborigines' situation, of how they speak in their vernacular, how they live, or how they feel.[5]

Yet action to help bridge the cultural gaps and help create social justice has begun. For

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[2] Gilbert, Kevin. "Black Policies." *Aboriginal Writing Today: Papers from the First National Conference of Aboriginal Writers.* Conference held in Perth, Western Australia, in 1983. Ed. Jack Davis and Bob Hodge. Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, 1985: 41.
[3] Gilbert 41.
[4] Jack Davis, *Aboriginal Writing Today...,* 5.
[5] Gilbert 40.

instance, during the past three decades, Manning Clark has been in process of writing Australian history which includes white injustice against Aborigines. His relatively new history books, which are applauded by white Australians, attempt to focus on the totality of Australian history and include both the strengths and positive aspects of white Australians as well as their weaknesses and their unjust and sometimes cruel actions and attitudes against the Aboriginal peoples and nations they uprooted. His writings about white injustices against the Aborigine corroborate Aboriginal writings about those injustices.

The key to Aboriginal writers bridging the gaps is to explore and reveal their own culture, their own humanity, in order to endow the lives of their children and to help white people know and understand the Aborigines' situation, how they speak in their vernacular, how they live, and how they feel. Bruce McGuinness affirms that a very real Aboriginal culture exists within urban Australia. He writes:

> It's very important that we understand that there are Aboriginal people within those concrete jungles that are striving to come out of their cocoons, are striving to bring themselves forward and to write, to act, to sing, to do things that people do throughout the world, but to do it in their way and not to have their creativity assimilated or to be drawn into a white perspective of doing things.[6]

For Aboriginal writers to maintain credibility necessitates no interference from white people when editing, producing, performing, or publishing.

That Aboriginal writers choose to write in English--that Aboriginal writers choose to write at all--is viewed as evidence of Aboriginal attitudes of reconciliation with the colonizers. Jack Davis records that the first published work by an Aborigine was in 1924.[7] Ronald Berndt asserts that writing for Aborigines is a sacred trust that cannot be taken lightly. Their task is to retain the flavor and atmosphere which may be distinguished from all other writings as being uniquely Aboriginal. That is, the writing retains "something of the power of imagination which was and still is a hallmark of traditional Aboriginal *oral* literature."[8]

This history which infuses Aboriginal writing, then, is not merely to portray past injustices by white Australians. History is more important, more inseparable from literature for Aboriginal writers than for white writers.[9] Facing history helps Aboriginal people come to grips with the fact that they are Aboriginal people. Bruce McGuinness stresses that if Aboriginal people are serious about achieving justice, then a commitment to their own history and consequently their own heritage must be made.[10] Facing history also may help reconcile injustices in the present situation by exposing the very foundation for today's cultural divisiveness, social prejudice, economic imbalance, miscommunication, and negative attitudes.

[6] McGuinness, Bruce, and Denis Walker, "The Politics of Aboriginal Literature." *Aboriginal Writing Today...,* 47.
[7] Davis 12.
[8] Berndt, Ronald M. "Opening Address," *Aboriginal Writing Today...,* 9.
[9] Davis 5.
[10] McGuinness 53.

By exposing the past, Aboriginal writers do not directly attack today's Australian white society. Rather, they expose the past in the hope that if the Australian white people are serious about achieving justice, then a commitment to their own history and consequently their own heritage must also be made, for the historical events interrelating white and black people in Australia are the same.

Aboriginal writers expose a common Australian history and at the same time their own humanity. By presenting family and community relationships and the use of vernacular, these writers have portrayed characters who have strong feelings, a significant spirituality and a desire to live lives marked by vitality.

An example of this phenomenon can be seen within Jack Davis' drama, *No Sugar*. A drama written by an Aborigine, *No Sugar* recounts the Millimurra family's stand against government pseudo-protection during the late 1920's and early 1930's depression in Australia. Davis locates his play in history; that is, the Moore River Native Settlement, where four hundred people, whose only crime was to be Aborigine, were forced into a compound suitable for two hundred people. Historical evidence reveals that the compound was fenced and policed. Furthermore, children and adults were not allowed to associate, even in the dining room, and children's dormitories were locked and bolted from the outside at six o'clock in the evening during summer.[11] Davis sets his drama in the settlement but outside the compound in order to explore family ties. (Vivid accounts of life at the Moore River Native Settlement can be found in *Not Slaves Not Citizens* by Peter Biskup, University of Queensland Press, 1973.) Nevertheless, while history permeates his drama, Davis focuses on family relationships and their struggle to live vital lives in a hostile world.

The drama reveals authority as a major factor affecting relationships between Aborigines and white society. That is, conflict occurs when white society projects authority and the Aborigine people struggle against and reject that authority. The ensuing power struggle between white and black people tends to propagate divisions with each other. However, the drama reveals that authority is very specific and relates to specific types of people who have particular roles in society. Social authority manifests itself through characters having specific roles in the society of work. Also, characters who have roles of authority serve as the major impetus for action by manipulating the Millimurra family. Those roles which define authority are government, military and corrupt Christianity.

Davis' *No Sugar* promotes a distinctly Aboriginal view of social history. Interactions between the government, military and Christian institutions within an intolerant white society helped create Aboriginal attitudes toward authority. These three elements worked together to create a kind of "moral police," especially toward the Aborigines, although these attributes were also true for white people with no social position. White society in general considered Aborigines and their culture repugnant, and therefore themselves and their society superior,

[11] Davis, Jack. *No Sugar.* Sydney: Currency Press, 1986.

which justified the government, military, and Christian action against Aborigines in order to "civilize" and spiritually "save" them. In other words, to the Aborigine, the moral police set out to destroy Aborigines and their culture under the pretense of helping them. On the other hand, the distinctly white moral police saw it as part of their role to protect the Aborigine.

Yet while the drama promotes the Aboriginal view of social history, that view is grounded in fact. Clark writes that Macquarie, Australia's governor during the early 1800's, devoted much time to civilize the Aborigines. "He aimed not only to protect them against the aggression of the white man but also to teach them habits of industry and decency so that they might abandon their indolence and squalor of their own way of life and join the working classes in both settlements."[12] Also, in 1939, Governor Gipps appointed a protector of Aborigines department. These people were to be both missionaries and teachers, and were charged to protect the Aborigines against the greed and cruelty of the white man.[13] While some people like Macquarie and Gipps seemed to truly believe in their actions as protective, others used these socially acceptable means as a cover to take what they wanted, such as land.

Davis' strongest authentication in using factual history to promote the Aboriginal point of view is by setting his drama during Neville's tenure of office. In the 1920's and 1930's, A. O. Neville was the head of the government office dedicated to protect Aborigines. But his idea of protecting them was to partition them from white Australian society, and he sanctioned white station masters as heads of government on Aboriginal land.[14] Examples of his policies included that fact that no Aboriginal parent was allowed to raise any child having any degree of white heritage, for black people were considered to be unworthy to raise anyone having a trace of white heritage. White station masters owned Aborigines and often took women and girls who consequently had children of mixed heritage. Because they had a degree of white heritage, the government removed the children from their mothers to be raised by white people. Sally Morgan vividly recounts this injustice in her biographical work, *My Place.* Fear permeated the Aborigines' world.

Fear also permeates the world of *No Sugar* because the characters have minimal control over their lives. Davis synedochically relates Neville to government and portrays the government as mechanical and inhuman, a system of .finances and policies established to propagate government interests. Neville is far more interested in saving money than in acting to benefit the Aborigines in any compassionate way. He eliminates soap and meat allowances for the Aborigines on the grounds that spending two shillings and fourpence per week to sustain a native is too costly, while at the same time, white unemployed persons receive seven shillings per week (20).

Davis begins to examine social history in depth by examining how the government

[12] Clark, Manning. *A Short History of Australia.* 2nd revised ed. New York: New American Library, 1980: 46.
[13] Clark 96.
[14] Davis, *No Sugar,* background reading, 117. Page numbers in parentheses will follow quotations and references to this play.

functions through its community representative, the police. In *No Sugar,* Sergeant Carrol, the sergeant of police at Northam where the Millimurra have their home, is described by Neville as the local Protector of Aborigines (21). The government makes plans to take the Aborigines' land; the problem is where and how to justify this plan. Neville charges Carrol the task of recommending a site in the Northam area to which the Aborigines can be displaced. He recommends the Guilford Road site, but Neville rejects it on the grounds that the white community plans to develop it as a recreation park. Carrol replies with "Pretty recent plans" (42). Carrol then recommends the Moore River Settlement, but Neville initially rejects it because the site is overcrowded. Later, however, he accepts the site under the pretense that the Aborigines at Northam are infected with scabies (47). The Millimurra family are then forced from their home and taken to the Moore River Settlement. They are allowed to take nothing except a few belongings. The bicycle that young David cared for is trashed and their homes burnt. The family is not allowed to take their dogs, yet the dogs helped bring home meat to feed the family. Mr. Neal, the superintendent at the Moore River Settlement, has the confiscated dogs destroyed. Near the end of the play, Davis sums up government and white society's reasons for the displacement of the Aborigines:

> Neville: It doesn't hurt to remind yourselves that you are preparing yourselves here to take your place in Australian society, to live as other Australians live, and to live alongside other Australians; to learn to enjoy the privileges and to shoulder the responsibilities of living like the white man, to be treated equally, not worse, not better, under the law.
> Sam: What's he talkin' about?
> Jimmy: He's talkin' out his *kwon.* [ass] (97f)

In *No Sugar,* military presence is found in several characters who follow instructions and enforce policies. Mr. N. S. Neal, Superintendent of the Moore River Settlement, represents combined government and military forces. He is sanctioned by the government to take whatever action he wants to control the Aborigines, while, at the same time, he must follow the orders of his superiors. However, he does not provide protection for the Aborigines. To Neville, the Aboriginal people are not human beings. He complains that thirty girls became pregnant after they were sent into domestic service, yet he doesn't take action against the white men who made them pregnant (20-21). Mr. Neal uses position of privilege to take liberties against Aborigine girls for his own pleasure, and the Aboriginal girls are afraid of him. A young Aboriginal woman character named Mary expresses this fear when she says, "He's always hangin' around where the girls are workin'; in the cookhouse, in the sewin' room. And he's always carryin' that cat-o'-nine tails and he'll use it, too" (62).

The young women are afraid of rape. To stress her point, Mary tells a story about her friend who went to work on a farm for a white man. His sons raped her, made her pregnant, then kicked her off the farm. After she had the baby, they found her, killed the baby by choking it to death and buried it (62). Because of her fear, Mary defies Mr. Neal by refusing to work in the hospital where Neal is known to take liberties. Consequently, he draws her across flour sacks and whips her (92-93). Davis took this whipping scene from a specific historical report at the Moore

River Settlement (117-118).

By setting the drama in the late 1920's and early 1930's, and by demonstrating the harmful actions of characters who represent government, Davis comments on the late 1920's/ early 1930's government from the Aborigines' point of view. Throughout *No Sugar,* Davis portrays governments of the past as an oppressive and frightening unseen force which invaded their world. Government people were untrustworthy and lacked compassion of any kind. While either pretending to help or sincerely trying to help Aborigines, they set out to destroy their culture and spirit. People employed by the government, and white persons having power over the Aborigines such as station masters were seen as government people by the Aborigines, for the government sanctioned these people to do nearly anything they wanted to do to the Aborigines.

In *No Sugar*, Davis further comments on the relationship between the government and the military. Clark points out that during Australia's early history, government, and military were one body, for Australia was originally a convict colony. Military officers spoke the law while their soldiers enforced the law--often in violent and cruel ways which usually included the whip. The law not only included civil law, but moral law as well. Macquarie urged propriety and rectitude for the upper classes and sobriety for the lower classes. He also wanted everyone to strictly observe religious duties and attend religious services regularly.[15] Because they were thousands of miles from any central control, military officers often had the freedom to make their own decisions and to act on their own. As a way to maintain control over the military, the British government tried to find officers and soldiers who proclaimed religious beliefs and who conformed with the puritan ideal.[16] Consequently, Christianity was infused within government and military influences in the very early stages of colonial development.

From the Aboriginal point of view the military was an extension of white government. The military developed practices whereby soldiers would implement orders with whips or they could force Aborigines with whips to keep other Aborigines in line. Cruel soldiers were not viewed as synonymous with the government, but instead, as persons who followed orders. They were unintelligent and cruel persons for whom the whip was the law. Without this weapon, they would have been without authority. They gain their purpose and meaning for existence from the use of the whip!

Davis, however, distinguishes between government/ military and white society. As an unseen force, white society is very much like the government. They regard Aborigines as contemptible and do not want them to be part of their community. This is evidenced by their taking action to keep the government from moving the Millimurra family to their district, usually by complaining in writing to Neville (21). However, Davis synecdochically relates the positive attributes of white society to the character Matron. Matron Neal is Mr. Neal's wife and is the matron in charge of the Settlement hospital. She is portrayed as a strong but compassionate

[15] Clark 43.
[16] Clark 81.

character who sees and treats the Aborigines as people. She tries to take care of their health and physical needs, and mediates between the Aboriginal people and government. She is also Mr. Neal's wife and abhors his promiscuity with the young women. In the drama, she serves as a moral check on the characters at the settlement who represent the government or military.

The two Aborigine trackers in the settlement camp, Bill Kimberley and Bluey, manifest military presence in the drama. On social occasions, Billy and Bluey wear absurdly ill-fitting uniforms (96). They belong to a different tribe, carry whips, enjoy telling other people what to do, and follow orders without thought. Their whips give them authority over people, and while characters are afraid of the whips, they are not afraid of either Billy or Bluey. The same people they hurt strive to know these two characters as people and often reprimand their actions. Billy eventually opens up to them and tells of the white man's massacre of his people (67-68). Davis bases Billy's account of the massacre in the Kimberley region on Daniel Evan's historical report of the Oombulgarri massacre (117).

Davis intertwines government and military hegemony with Christianity. Christian principles were used to justify both government and military actions, and this fact provides a frightening twist for the perceptions of spiritually in white civilization. A corrupted Christianity infused most, if not all, authority within white society and remained a malevolent unseen force which was abhorrent to the Aborigines. Christian clergy or religious proclaimers were seen as either unintelligent, malicious, and self-serving or unintelligent, ineffectual, but kind. The clergy were associated with Aboriginal education, for one of their major tasks was to educate the Aborigines so that they might assimilate into white society.

Davis' point of view is historically accurate. In 1810, Macquarie appointed Reverend Samuel Marsden to be a governmental trustee, and later as principal chaplain. Marsden was known as the "flogging parson."[17] With full support of Bathurst as Britain's Secretary of State for Colonies, Christian evangelicals assumed an ascendancy in the society of New South Wales.[18] During this era of colonial development in Australia, people proclaiming Christianity sought to have an impact on this emerging society. However, as O'Farrell points out in his article, the quality of clergy was low and their behavior ridiculous. He writes:

> Australia attracted many of Britain's clerical failures, the fools, the second-rate, the well-meaning incompetents. The tight black suit and the tolled umbrella of the standard *Bulletin* caricature clergyman implies his reputation for dismal spoil-sport pessimism in a land of informality, warmth and optimism. The typical clergyman was seen as incongruous, out of place....Particularly in the Australian outback, clerical black and other elements of British religious gab seems formal and impractical to the point of being ridiculous. The whole external image of imported religion in Australia appeared as somber, constricting, and stifling in a land of color, fun and freedom.[19]

[17] Marsden, Samuel. *The Oxford Companion to Australian Literature* (1986).
[18] Clark 47.
[19] O'Farrell, Patrick. "The Cultural Ambivalence of Australian Religion." *Australian Cultural History.* Ed. F. B. Smith and S. L. Goldberg. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988: 8.

And, in a way, the clergy were also frightening:

> It was also an index of respectability, of civilization, another dimension of the known and assumed patterns of social behavior. And of course it was an adjunct to state and police power. But while these characteristics seemed merits to the governing orders, the lower orders saw them in reverse. Religion was seen as the preserve of the respectable, and a weapon of an authoritarian status quo.[20]

Davis uses past social history as a foundation for characters' attitudes and actions. White society's popular way to civilize Aborigines was to try to educate them. At first, the government took responsibility for educational programs. Early in 1815, Macquarie opened a native institution at Parramatta for Aboriginal boys and girls as well as a farm on the shores of Port Jackson for adults. However, parents continually attempted to lure their children from the school because they considered white civilized ways repulsive.[21]

Soon, however, Christian clergy and religious leaders focused on Aboriginal education and, in a short span of time, this task became identified with Christian institutions. "As evidence of their high principles and their awareness of motives other than the pursuit of material gain, they proclaimed their intention to introduce the Aborigines to civilization and so lead them into a voluntary and peaceful acceptance of the Christian religion."[22] However, their attempts were ineffective, not only with the aborigines, but in white society as well. Clark explains:

> By their fulsome support for temperance movements, as well as for the reduction of prostitution and gambling, the Protestant clergy were identified in the public eye as moral policemen for a particular way of life rather than teachers by precept and example of the way of salvation. By continuing to counsel subordination and to urge the poor to accept their lowly station in life, they prostituted their religion to the service of the social needs of the classes in power in Australian colonies and in London. For good or evil the Protestant clergy had allowed their religion to become a religion of social utility and its reputation to depend on the survival in that society of the need for moral policemen.[23]

Through hypocrisy the clergy corrupted the Christianity they proclaimed.

Meantime, the Aborigines saw that white society continued to define civilization for the Aborigine, and white society continued to take action against them. Historical evidence supports this point of view. For instance, a popular sport in Sydney, Parramatta, and Hobart Town was to encourage intoxicated Aborigines to murder or mangle each other for the amusement of the white spectators. In the country districts, white settlers methodically killed Aborigines in order to

[20] O'Farrell 9.
[21] Clark 47.
[22] Clark 82.
[23] Clark 117.

take the land, the Aborigines retaliated in kind, and the white man in turn continued to "exact an eye for any eye and a tooth for a tooth."[24] White people were able to take these actions because their society condoned them. There is one significant case when government officials did not condone white violence against Aborigines. The Myall Creek Massacre in 1838 was an incident where twenty-eight Aborigines were killed by twelve white men. Despite the "widely held view in the Colony that it was absurd to punish white men for the extermination of Aborigines," Governor George Gipps proceeded to charge and subsequently execute seven of the guilty men.[25] White society considered the Governor's actions outrageous.[26]

In *No Sugar,* Jack Davis depicts Christians as lacking in compassion and ineffective, and, at times, their behavior is frightening. Milly's young daughter, Cissie, catches pneumonia and is taken to the hospital. In order to keep the health of the family, Milly and Gran ask the Sergeant for blankets. He refuses.

> Sergeant: Why don't youse go around to St. John's and ask the vicar?
> Milly: For Blankets? He'll give us nothin', he's like that.
> Gran: *[adopting a praying attitude]* Yeah, when he come to Gubment Well he goes like that with his eyes closed and he says the Lord will help you, and now he prays with his eyes open, 'cause time 'fore last Wow Wow bit him on the leg...musta wanted a bit a' holy meat. (43)

The Millimurra family know that people who proclaim to be Christian lack compassion. Their sarcasm is a way to reject the authority of their society.

Davis reveals the relationship among the institutions of Christianity, government and military as both ineffective and, yet, frightening. Be-cause religion is viewed as in ineffectual force, the characters do not take those interrelationships seriously. For instance, Frank is teased about how he married in the church and became engaged under a government blanket (27). Also, after damaging government property, Jimmy sarcastically sings a hymn to the Sergeant, imploring the Mother of Christ to save and protect his people, which is what the government claims to do (32).

Sister Eileen represents ineffective Christianity in the drama. She asks Mr. Neal for books for the children, but he refuses and demands they not read at all. When she protests, he threatens to send her away, and she gives in (95-96). Also, her primary function is to teach the children at Moore River Settlement. Yet her Sunday School teachings have no meaning for the children. Her class is interrupted when Billy whips David for going swimming instead of going to Sunday School. Cissie tries to go to his aid, but Sister Eileen stops her and takes David aside. She blames him for his beating, then gives him a humbug (89-91). The word humbug has a triple meaning, however. It is 1) candy, 2) misleading behavior or talk which intends to win support or

[24] Clark 47.
[25] "Myall Creek Massacre," *The Oxford Companion to Australian Literature* (1986).
[26] Clark 96.

sympathy, and 3) a person who behaves or talks in this way.[27] Literally, David and the rest of the children are given candy. Figuratively, however, Sister Eileen is a humbug who attempts to win the children's support and acceptance, not by caring about them, but by giving them candy.

Christianity fused with government also creates fear in society, for Christianity infuses society with expectations which are not carried out in government policies. Furthermore, Christianity sanctions government actions against the Aborigines by refusing to acknowledge the harm of their unjust actions, thereby embracing those injustices. In *No Sugar*, this is accomplished by labeling the people in authority as servants of Jesus Christ, and by telling the Aborigines that these people serve their needs. During the Australia Day celebration, Sister Eileen, addresses the settlement:

> We must remember today not just our country and King, but the King of Kings, the Princes of Princes, and to give thanks to God for what He has provided for us because our sustenance in life is provided by Him. Even we here today, Mr. Neal, Matron Neal and myself, are but his humble servants, sent by Him to serve your needs. The Lord Jesus Christ has sent His servant, Mr. Neville, chief Protector of Aborigines, to speak to us on this special day. (97)

The Aboriginal view of authority rooted in their historical experience functions as a foundation for characters' beliefs and actions. The authority projected by government, military and corrupt Christian institutions spreads-out through *No Sugar* as an umbrella over the Aborigines' lives. For nearly every Aboriginal character, these authorities determine what they eat, what they do, where they live and the offering or denial of opportunities, health, and freedom.

Davis focuses his drama on the Millimurra family, their situation, their vernacular dialect, how they live and feel. The Millimurra family members' struggle against authority reveals their humanity, and this hope for their humanity provides the primary action for the drama. The two children, Cissie and David, lead happy and well-adjusted lives despite their situation because their family ties are strong. At the Moore River Settlement, men dance a corroboree, which is a celebration of their spiritual ties to the earth. And two young people, Joe and May, meet at the settlement, fall in love, commit to each other, and have a baby during the course of the play. Davis ends the drama with hope for his people, for Joe and his family peacefully leave the settlement to return to their land to begin a new life.

The authority which permeates this drama, then, does not merely portray past injustices by white society. Rather, the authority revealed in the drama, developed and promoted in Australian history, from the Aborigine point of view, helps us examine the humanity of the Australian Aboriginal people without directly attacking today's white society. This way, Jack Davis attempts to reconcile the cultures of his land and to "present evidence" of past struggles in order to promote social justice.

[27] "Humbug," *The Australian Oxford Paperback Dictionary* (1989).

