

Aboriginal Workers

By Ann McGrath and Kay Saunders,
Editors, with Jackie Huggins

Special Issue of *Labour History* 69. Sydney: Australian Society
for the Study of Labour History, Faculty of Economics,
University of Sydney, 1995. 233 pp.

Subscriptions: Individual, Australian \$30, Institutions, Australian \$60.

*Aboriginal Labour and the Cattle Industry:
Queensland from White Settlement to the Present*

Dawn May

Cambridge and Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1994.
242 pp. US\$59.95 cloth.

*Indians at Work: An Informal History
of Native Labour in British Columbia, 1858-1930*

Rolf Knight

Revised edition. Vancouver: New Star, 1996. 397 pp. Illus. \$24 paper.

BY DIANNE NEWELL, *University of British Columbia*

With a forthrightness more characteristic of Australian than Canadian scholars, historians Ann McGrath and Kay Saunders argue in their edited collection, *Aboriginal Workers*, that Australia's national history has rarely allowed space for the history of Aboriginal work. They suggest that the relative silence of historians on the issue of Aboriginal work and workers effectively props up an enduring racial stereotype of Aborigines as incapable of or unwilling to "work" away from their traditional communities. This racial stereotype is an enduring legacy of the imperial project.

McGrath and Saunders suggest that labour historians could have taken the lead in overcoming such racial

stereotypes but failed to do so. However devoted they may have been to workers' causes, Australian labour historians have had trouble accepting the idea of Aboriginal workers. Whether by their silence on the subject of Aboriginal workers or their misguided attempts to explain why Aborigines did not work, labour historians have added to the larger ignorance (the "great Australian silence" [2]) of Aboriginal history and race relations. More specifically, they have, in effect, prevented explorations of Aboriginal workers' resistance and accommodation, their adaptability, the diversity of the work performed, and racial interactions in the workplace, then and now.

It is, therefore, fitting that McGrath and Saunders chose a special issue of

Labour History, which is the premier journal of labour and social history in Australasia, as a showcase for recent explorations into the history of Aboriginal work and workers. This is a compelling collection of revisionist scholarship for anyone interested in labour history or Aboriginal history in any industrial country. Of special note is the opening historiographical essay, "Working for the White People," by Ann Cuthroys and Clive Moore. The rest of the collection treats Aboriginal work in a dizzying variety of areas: pastoral industries, sports, the sex trade, domestic service, military service and wartime labour, the public sector, business, and the creative arts. Significant attention is paid to pastoralism, a widely dispersed economic activity that prevailed from the mid-nineteenth century to the 1960s; to the post-Second World War era, with its rapidly changing political context in which Indigenous peoples everywhere fought for economic self-sufficiency and cultural survival; and to female workers. In this regard, the individual essays by Peggy Brock on pastoral stations and reserves in South and Central Australia, by McGrath on images of Aboriginal labour and sexuality, and by Saunders on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander labour in Northern Australia during the Second World War are exemplary.

Of the diverse forms of, mainly low-wage, employment open to some Australian Aboriginal peoples, stock production and domestic work on pastoral stations and reserves have received the greatest attention from historians and anthropologists, who have produced a half-dozen monographs on the subject in the past decade. The latest volume published is Dawn May's *Aboriginal Labour and the Cattle Industry*. In this industry, it was pos-

sible for Aboriginal peoples to remain on familiar territory, to be highly mobile, and to establish a symbiotic relationship with the pastoralists. May documents the struggle of White settlers to establish a cattle industry in Queensland and demonstrates the indispensability of Aboriginal men and women to that goal. Aboriginal pastoralists were the invisible pioneers who, under colonization, lost control of their lands and labour to the new economic order in which they were forced to participate. Although she uses sources and an approach that reveal more about state intervention and the activities of the White pastoralists than they do about Aboriginal workers, the remarkable, if harrowing, story of Aboriginal workers comes through. It is a history of accommodation and resistance, coercion and conflict, and terror, then eventual movement towards independence for Aboriginal peoples. The book's strength rests in its detail and excellent appendices, which provide estimates on the number of Aboriginal workers in the cattle industry of Queensland and locations of cattle properties there. Significant, too, is May's willingness to address contemporary issues of Native title. In the changing legal climate since 1970, a few Aboriginal people and communities in Queensland have been able to purchase cattle stations and take over the management of national parks, thus opening the possibility of pursuing more traditional forms of land use and control.

Until recently, the only monograph devoted to a history of Aboriginal labour in Canada was Rolf Knight's *Indians at Work: An Informal History of Native Labour in British Columbia, 1848-1930*, first published in 1978. The original edition offered a provocative

overview of White-Indian relations to 1930 in British Columbia, a resource-rich province with, historically, the highest and most culturally diverse concentration of Indians in Canada. Knight, an anthropologically trained labour historian, challenged the old assumptions and conclusions of previous ethnographies and works of history, which treated Indians in British Columbia simply as part of the pre-European past. He wanted to counter Robin Fisher's 1977 historical study, *Contact and Conflict: Indian-European Relations in British Columbia, 1774-1890*, which alleges that after the end of the age of fur enterprise in British Columbia, Indians were reduced to irrelevance in the industrial economy of incoming White settlers. Knight refused either to place Indians on a pedestal or to see them as helpless victims, although in subjecting Indian workers to a class-based analysis Knight seemed to err in the opposite direction. Knight culled existing published and unpublished studies and the annual reports of the Department of Indian Affairs to demonstrate that Indians were active participants in industrializing British Columbia, which until at least the 1930s demanded seasonal labour in temporary resource work camps and company towns. And he argues that in participating in construction, fishing and fish processing, farming, forestry, mining, transportation, and cottage and reserve industries, BC Indians were not simply following their "natural" inclinations and traditional activities: they were operating within entirely new structures.

Aptly named an informal history, the 1978 edition of *Indians at Work* is a polemic, a hastily produced synthesis written to counter Fisher's then recently published history of White-

Indian relations in British Columbia. It was a cheap product of a struggling local leftist press that possessed limited marketing ability. The pages and binding disintegrated at a touch. The illustrations were a mess. The essential documentation for statements of fact and conclusions was hit-and-miss. By the early 1980s, it was impossible to find a copy in bookstores. Despite its poor quality and inaccessibility, Knight's insights and arguments were so fresh and thoughtful that the book gathered a strong following over the next two decades. I was one of many fans.

For many that championed the original book, including BC First Nations, the recently published revised edition comes as a disappointment: It has the same old title but a very different message. The thrust of Knight's revisions to the eighteen-year-old book signal his opposition to the BC government's recent recognition of an Aboriginal right and willingness to undertake Native land claims negotiations. He laments that at the time he wrote the original version of *Indians at Work*, "any policy that required the transfer of large blocks of land and other public resources to exclusive Indian title seemed utter fantasy" (327). One wonders where Knight was when the Supreme Court of Canada's 1973 ruling in the landmark *Calder* case, a long-standing land claim of the Nishga of British Columbia, established the possibility that unextinguished Aboriginal rights existed in Canada. This possibility immediately led to the revision of federal policy on claims and a promise to negotiate with Indians. By and large the modern claims process has been remarkably ineffective south of the 60th parallel. This failure is deeply felt in British Columbia, where most First Nations never signed treaties.

Knight's opposition to Native claims will not be immediately apparent to readers, who will instead learn from his preface to the new edition that he is neutral on the subject: "None of the discussion presented in this book is intended to bear upon contemporary Native claims, one way or another. None of it was gathered with that enterprise in mind and none of it is intended for such use" (xii). He writes that his revisions are "trivial," laced with "a degree of irreverence," limited to modifications of "certain passages" and the occasional addition of "new information," "but basically that account remains as originally written" (xi). Nevertheless, the author's sharp opinions and his discussions of both old and new research on Native studies are tucked into the text and endnotes of every chapter. He criticizes or trivializes the work of scholars such as Wayne Suttles, who have been influential in promoting Native people in the courts, and boosts the expertise of

researchers such as Duncan Stacey, who work on behalf of the Crown against Native interests. By the final pages of the new edition of *Indians at Work*, Knight's opposition to Native title and self-government becomes a rant against the "Native Agenda" of ethnic-based claims, which he attributes to the recent emergence of a Native middle class and non-Indians who support that agenda (326-28).

The histories of Aboriginal work considered in this review reinforce my impression that it is impossible to discuss meaningfully Native economic and labour history without raising the issue of Aboriginal title. The landmark ruling on Aboriginal title handed down by the Supreme Court of Canada in the case of *Delgamuukw v. British Columbia* in December 1997 places the Aboriginal peoples of Canada in the strongest position ever to claim ownership and use of their ancestral lands. Tradition holds that the significance of this Canadian ruling will also be felt in Australia.

*A Persistent Spirit: Towards Understanding
Aboriginal Health in British Columbia*

Peter H. Stephenson, Susan J. Elliott,
Leslie T. Foster, and Jill Harris, Editors

Canadian Western Geographical Series 31, Victoria: University of
Victoria, 1995 (distributed through UBC Press). 390 pp., \$25 paper.

BY MARY-ELLEN KELM

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A *Persistent Spirit* is a collection of twelve essays written by a range of authors, including community health officers, government statisticians, private consultants,

academics, and psychotherapists. Peter Stephenson and Susan Elliott state simply that the intention of the book "is to inform, to raise awareness of Aboriginal health issues, and to point