
# *South Australian Aborigines Protection Board (1939-1962) and governance through 'scientific' expertise: a genealogy of protection and assimilation*

*Margaret Macilwain*

*PhD thesis*
*Politics*
*Adelaide University*

*20 November 2006*

# *Contents*

# *Abstract*

The thesis offers a Foucaultian genealogy of the governmental policies of protection and assimilation as they affected Aborigines in South Australia up to the 1960s. The central actor in the thesis is the Aborigines Protection Board (1939-1962) because the Board signalled a shift in the forms of liberal governance to include 'scientific' experts in the governance of Aboriginal people. Executive 'scientific' experts were appointed from the areas of medicine, protection of women, anthropology, mission organisation, agriculture and education, and in the process a 'two-way street' of expertise was created whereby government drew 'scientific' experts into its structure through networks with University organisations, and bureaucrats infiltrated the University. As a result, the experts' knowledges created a biopolitics, which determined methods of governance of Aboriginal people. Government used the rhetoric of 'scientific expertise' both to problematise Aboriginal affairs in ways to make them amenable to governance, and to condone non-liberal practices in this area. Older disciplinary and pastoral techniques based upon 'hybrid' knowledges—a combination of personal experience of the job and 'scientific' knowledge—persisted.

The genealogy presents an aspect of twentieth-century political thought and contributes to a general history of ideas in Australia. It provides fresh insights into definitions of Aboriginality used for governing purposes and into authoritarian practices like removal of children from their kin. The genealogy identifies that the period studied is more usefully described in terms of Foucault's triangular relations of sovereignty-discipline-government than as linear progressions between disciplinary and pastoral practices and self-government. It illustrates that 'scientific expertise' served both a practical need and, as stated, a rhetorical one. While there was a belief in the claims to objective knowledge offered by scientific experts, the turn to scientific 'experts' was also used by government to facilitate a mode of governance that excluded those with experience, including Aborigines, from executive governing processes. Finally, the thesis shows how a liberal government compromised accountability temporarily so as to change modes of governance significantly. Through the use of an executive Aborigines Protection Board, the South Australian Government gave executive authority to unelected, non-representative experts and incorporated the normalising categories of the medical, anthropological, and social sciences until bureaucrats themselves had acquired the desired expertise. At that point, non-government experts became advisers only.