

Review of Bell's *Daughters of the Dream*

Diane Bell. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. 1983 / 1993. vi + 342 pp., paper.

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This is feminist anthropology intended to right the wrongs of generations of ethnocentric male anthropologists who have had little or no intellectual access to Aboriginal women, have uncritically accepted whatever male Aborigines told them about their women, have filtered those reports through their own sexist preconceptions, and have imposed that perspective even on female anthropologists who have worked with Aboriginal women. From Bell's perspective, we knew very little if anything about Aboriginal women until she lived and worked with them, beginning in the 1970s and continuing in attenuated form through the 1980s.

Although Bell states and defends her position with excessive vigor and abrasiveness, I think she is basically right, not only in her value judgments but also in her observations. I am critical of some of the fine points, but am fully supportive of what she tried to do both in the field and in her book.

Bell conducted the bulk of her fieldwork at Warrabri Settlement in 1976-77. The political context is significant. Formal government policy and informal frontier policy toward Aborigines in Central Australia has passed through three distinct phases. The 19th century sanctioned and sought genocide. Much of the early 20th century sanctioned and sought forced acculturation by means that included abducting Aboriginal children from their families and forcibly removing Aboriginal families and entire language groups from their lands. Despite their devastating impacts on Aboriginal individuals and societies, both sets of policies mercifully failed to achieve their grim objectives. Beginning in the 1970s, the Aboriginal Land Rights movement reestablished many Aboriginal people on their own lands and at least in theory permitted them to live their own lives following their own traditions. Bell began her work at a time and in a location where the forced acculturation philosophy had reached its fullest development.

She says (1993:8): "In many ways Warrabri resembled a refugee camp more than a small rural town." The 1976-77 population at Warrabri included 70-80 whites who ran the settlement and about 750 Aborigines who lived there. Among the Aborigines, Bell reports that the linguistic affiliations were: Alyawarra 35%, Walpiri 35%, Warumungu and Warlmanpa 20%, Kaytej 10%, with small numbers of Anmatjirra and others. Traditionally Walpiri, Warumungu and Warlmanpa lived at very low population densities in territories to the west of Warrabri, while Alyawarra, Kaytej and Anmatjirra lived at low densities to the east. By 1976 they were concentrated in a highly artificial and painfully cramped setting at Warrabri.

The context of Bell's research stands in sharp contrast with that of other research conducted with the Alyawarra at about the same time. My ethnographic research and Jim O'Connell's ethnoarchaeological research, both conducted at MacDonald Downs and Derry Downs Stations on the Bunday River in the early 1970s, dealt with people living a much more traditional and protected lifestyle. A few of them worked as stockmen, but most lived in isolated camps where they had few contacts with whites or other Aborigines. Colin Yallop's linguistic research at Lake Nash Station on the Queensland border, conducted late in the 1960s, occurred in a labor camp setting where many of the Aboriginal men worked as stockmen for the corporation that operated the cattle station. The context of Richard Moyle's musicological research at Ammaroo Station on the Sandover River, conducted late in the 1970s, appears to have resembled the situation at MacDonald Downs except that relations between the Alyawarra and the station operators was more strained at Ammaroo than at MacDonald Downs.

I emphasize the diverse political and social contexts of these various projects for one might think that the setting in which Bell worked would have seriously distorted her findings and conclusions. But quite remarkably all of the works to which I refer here form a coherent whole. Bell's in particular sheds a great deal of light on the Alyawarra women whose lives, as depicted in the other projects, often occur in the shadows. Specifically, what Bell reports from her Alyawarra informants at Warrabri agrees in virtually every detail with what I experienced at MacDonald Downs, but I saw it from a distance, blurred and obscured, with little freedom to probe, while Bell saw it much more clearly and probed deeply, albeit through her own imperfect lens.

But enough. Bell's work has spawned a proper cottage industry among Australian anthropologists who are righteously indignant at her righteous indignation. She may be *abrasive*, but the fact that she is *right* makes it tolerable.