

Nicolas Peterson, ed., *Aboriginal Land Rights: A Handbook*. Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, 1981. Pp. vi, 297. \$13.75.

Over the past fifteen years the issue of Aboriginal land rights has attracted a great deal of attention in Australia and, as with the case of the controversy over Noonkanbah in 1980, occasionally drawn an international audience as well. There are many difficulties facing the novice interested in the subject, particularly one seeking comparative material on the question of aboriginal rights. Among the problems are how to find and sort through the large amount of literature produced on the land-rights question, how to keep track of the changing legislation, and, perhaps most important, how to get beyond the normally superficial analyses offered by journalists, politicians, academics, and others on the topic. Given this situation, the idea of a handbook on Aboriginal land rights seems a very good idea. A book such as the one under review, growing out of a major symposium on land rights (Canberra, 1980) and edited by a well-known scholar in the field (Nicolas Peterson), is met with great anticipation, promising to fill a conspicuous gap in the literature. Unfortunately, expectations are at best only partially met. All things considered, this is a very disappointing book.

The volume contains a series of generally short review articles that highlight the main points of existing legislation, usually followed by appendixes listing the various parcels of land involved. Thus one eight-page article on the situation in Victoria is followed by a forty-four-page appendix of sites. It is as if the significance and success of the Aboriginal land rights movement can be measured solely by the number of acts passed and hectares turned over to Aborigines. For the "facts" of land rights we are presented with the narrowest range of empirical data. What passes for analysis is limited for the most part to the first page of Peterson's introduction where we are offered a fairly simplistic explanation for the rise and relative success of the land rights movement that does not even begin to approach the depth of understanding so badly needed.

This is not to say that the collection is worthless, for it is no doubt useful to have reviews of the various laws and some other aspects of land rights collected in one place, even if the material is generally handled superficially and is in some cases now a little out of date (as in the case of New South Wales where new legislation was passed in 1983). Also, there are two articles worthy of note. Ross Howie provides a good, brief history of the important legislation in the Northern Territory that if supplemented with other material provides a useful introduction to the situation in this state, and Christopher Anderson has written a very good history of the situation in Queensland. But overall it is not a collection that most readers would find helpful in their search for greater insight into the Aboriginal land rights question.

What is perhaps most troubling about the book is that it seems to be part of a general trend among non-Aboriginal academics and the emerging Aboriginal elite to pat themselves on the back (albeit gently) over the progress that they feel has been made in the struggle for Aboriginal rights through the passage of the various acts and the acquisition of assorted pieces of land and royalties. That progress has been made no one can deny, but there is as yet little cause for celebration. It is quite clear that land-rights continue to elude a large number of Aborigines and that even for those who have achieved some recognition of their claims the benefits they have derived to date have been less than inspiring. In fact it is questionable whether there has been any improvement at all for most Aborigines in social or material terms. That this may not be the fault of the land rights movement simply accentuates the point that it is not the great panacea for what is in many ways an increasingly desperate situation. These and many other issues are not addressed in the handbook. Clearly, what is still needed is a handbook that offers deeper analysis of the land-rights question, placing laws and hectares more firmly within a political, social, and economic context.

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