

Ronald M. Berndt and Catherine H. Berndt, *End of an Era: Aboriginal Labour in the Northern Territory*. Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, 1987. Pp. xxi, 310, maps, tables, diagrams, photographs, index. A\$29.95.

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Ronald and Catherine Berndt studied Aboriginal labor on the huge pastoral properties of the Australian Investment Agency (Vesteys) in northern Australia between 1944 and 1946. It was exacting work for two young anthropologists who had only just begun their careers. The cattle industry needed Aborigines, whom it employed in large numbers but treated badly. Just how badly is shown by the chapter the Berndts devote to conditions in the Australian Army camps where many Aborigines were employed during World War II. They were properly fed, worked limited hours, received wages, and were given adequate medical attention. The contrast with the pastoral properties was so striking that many Aborigines must have begun to realize that life could hold out more, much more, than they had been given to think.

The research on which the Berndts embarked had been conceived by E. W. P. Chinnery and A. P. Elkin, to both of whom *End of an Era* is dedicated. Chinnery, who had worked in New Guinea, was director of the Native Affairs Branch, Northern Territory Administration, and an adviser to the Commonwealth government. Elkin, professor of anthropology at Sydney University and editor of *Oceania*, was already accepted by the Australian public as *the* authority on Aborigines and had been urging his reformist views on governments and missions alike. At a high level, then, the backing existed for research into the pastoral industry, but the Berndts themselves were usually anything but welcome among the white people on whom they had to depend during their studies in the outback. These people would mostly have been ignorant or contemptuous of the new directions in Australian policy toward the native population that had been formed by 1939; unfortunately, war broke out, and the new directions became a casualty. They were not to be implemented for some years after peace returned.

*End of an Era* deals with six pastoral properties (Birrundudu, Limbunya, Manbulloo, Waterloo, Wave Hill, Willeroo) as well as the army camps and camps set up by buffalo shooters. Food, wages, housing, and other vital aspects of life are covered. A statistical chapter pulls together many of the data on which the earlier, more descriptive chapters depend. Much of the account suffers from repetition, but this is no literary work. As chapter follows chapter, a powerful cumulative effect is achieved. One can readily imagine some Zola of the outback quarrying the Berndts for raw material for a harrowing novel.

It is dismaying to think that so timely and necessary an account had to wait until 1987 for publication. The Berndts discuss the reasons for this, and also explain why they have considerably amplified and revised their original report on "Native Labour and Welfare in the Northern

Territory," which ran to 294 pages plus tables. Completed in 1946, it was never publicly distributed, and of the half dozen copies that were made, it seems that only one or two are still in existence. Luckily the contents of the report were made known in quarters where they could do some good. For example, improved legal conditions for Aborigines resulted from a conference of pastoralists and government officials held in Alice Springs in January 1947. A copy of the report was before the meeting. More than twenty years, however, would elapse before Aboriginal workers became entitled to the same wages as others doing the same jobs.

One can be glad to have the present account, yet be sorry that the original (with its unparalleled value as a document) is so scarce as not to exist for the purposes of the many scholars and others who might wish to consult it. One must also regret that the Berndts have left their readers little in the dark about the changes they made for publication. Quite a few pages are written from a much more recent perspective and refer to developments since 1946, but no real attempt seems to have been made to refer to what has happened in the labor force and been done by scholars in the last twenty years, or to deal with fluctuations in the climate of opinion affecting Aborigines. It might have been better to reprint the original report, perhaps with annotations, and to have had a separate study examining, more analytically and theoretically, the end of one era and the dawn of another.

Ronald and Catherine Berndt were virtually unknown when they began their work on the pastoral properties. Their many younger colleagues in Australian anthropology today would be fascinated to be presented with the copious material that is barely hinted at here: the correspondence with Vestey and with Elkin, and their memories or diary entries of "scenes or events which we witnessed personally or in which we were personally involved," but which they have chastely omitted from the present account. The Berndts are so important a part of our history that it is not merely voyeuristic to want to know these things.