
VISUAL MEDIA REVIEWS

Mabo: Life of an Island Man. 1997. Video, 87 min., color. Co-produced by Trevor Graham and Denise Haslem, directed by Trevor Graham. New York: First Run/Icarus Films; distributed by West Glen Communications (1430 Broadway, New York, NY 10018).

Reviewed by Deborah Bird Rose, Australian National University

THE AUSTRALIAN HIGH COURT'S "Mabo decision" of 1992 was a major blow to the foundational mythology of Australian nationhood. The nation had long been held in both popular imagination and political rhetoric to rest on completed conquest, a conception held stable by the *terra nullius* doctrine that at the time the British claimed the continent it was unowned (occupied, but without a system of land tenure). Eddie Koiki Mabo, of Mer Island in the Torres Strait between Australia and Papua New Guinea, initiated the court case that became the defining battle of his life: a challenge for recognition of ownership of land, sea, and resources. The High Court found in favor of Mabo, determining that at the time of conquest there had been a system of land tenure on Mer Island and that that system was still valid. Labeled the Mabo decision, it knocked away the founding myth. In principle, indigenous people continue to exercise rights of ownership—now labeled "Native Title"—except in areas where conquest and appropriation have formally extinguished those rights. The eloquent decision drew much of its moral force from the new wave of Aboriginal history (dubbed by conservatives the "black armband" school of history). In drawing on a narrative of history that challenged the complacency of imperialist narratives, it threw open all the big questions of nationhood. Where and what was the Austra-

lian nation if conquest was in some sense incomplete, and if the territory of the nation was subject to indigenous law?

Mabo: Life of an Island Man is a sympathetic portrait of Eddie Mabo made by a filmmaker, Trevor Graham, who became a friend of the family. It is neither judgmental nor overtly political. Graham's decision to tell the story in a straight biographical mode was, in my view, the crucial decision in this film. It was not only smart, but wise; the result is a superb documentary. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples were until 1967 wards of the state (unless they were able to acquire an "exemption" from this status). Their civil liberties were almost nonexistent, and fundamental aspects of their lives were managed by government officials. For them, the personal was the public, and the public was the political. The telling of a personal story becomes the telling of a public and political story, and enables the story to be told for maximum political and personal impact, since it is precisely the invasion of the political into the personal that for indigenous peoples constituted a gross and enduring violation of their human rights.

The late Eddie Mabo was an extraordinary man. The film portrays him through his own accounts of himself (interviews and letters), through the eyes of his family and neighbors, through interviews with countrymen back on Mer Island, and through interviews with two influential "white" historians, Noel Loos and Henry Reynolds, each of whom was close to him. There is nothing one-sided in the portraits: his problems with his countrymen and his family are part of the story, as are his radical affiliations and his problems with Queensland's "special branch" (secret service). The film does not provide an external analytic frame, so certain issues remain unexamined. For example, the outrage that erupted across Australia in response to the High Court's Mabo decision is portrayed in this film as fragmented noise. Perhaps this is how the family heard the uproar; it sounded like that to me too, after a while. Australians know what is being said here, but non-Australian viewers are likely to want more information. As a teaching tool, *Mabo: Life of an Island Man* would work well with one of the excellent post-Mabo studies (for example, Rowse 1993, Sharp 1996, or Attwood 1996).

One of the questions the Mabo decision raised was whether the High Court's findings of a system of land tenure would be applicable to mainland Australian hunter-gatherers who differ greatly from Torres Strait Islanders. The Australian Parliament implemented the Native Title Act (1993) to provide a legislative framework within which the continuity of Native Title can be asserted. The first decision concerning a claim on the mainland was handed down in November 1998: Justice Lee of the Federal Court of Australia found in favor of the Miriuwung Gajerrong Aboriginal applicants. It

now seems clear that Eddie Mabo's challenge will reverberate to the benefit of indigenous peoples not only across the islands but across much of the mainland as well.

Mabo died in 1992, not long before the High Court handed down its decision. He was buried quietly and unostentatiously in Townsville, and three years later, as is Torres Strait Islander custom, a large public ceremony was held to unveil the tombstone, release the family from mourning, and celebrate the life of the deceased. I do not want to give away the closing scenes of this film, for they are immensely powerful. It is important to know, however, that in the end this film shows why indigenous people require land rights. We see how the culture of conquest, with its hatred of anything that disrupts white supremacy, is a significant part of contemporary Australia. We also see how alliances of family and friends withstand that brutality.

I recommend the film to all who are interested in contemporary Pacific history, in relations between indigenous and settler peoples, and in postcolonial possibilities for social justice.

REFERENCES

Attwood, B., ed.

1996 *In the Age of Mabo: History, Aborigines, and Australia*. Sydney: Allen and Unwin.

Rowse, T.

1993 *After Mabo: Interpreting Indigenous Traditions*. Carlton: Melbourne University Press.

Sharp, N.

1996 *No Ordinary Judgment: Mabo, the Murray Islanders' Land Case*. Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press.