



Fever in the Archive

» ANNA HAEBICH

Archives are already stories¹

The once serene space of the historical archive is no longer. Outed by Derrida's statement in *Archive Fever* that 'there is no political power without control of the archive, or without memory', the archive has become the site of fierce debate over contested politics, truths, ontologies and historiographies.² A side road has been the burgeoning awareness of archives as 'active, generative substances with histories' and the growth of scholarly studies of archives' own backstories.³ For these studies, John Randolph proposes biography as a useful 'heuristic metaphor' since archives 'lead social lives and have character, have histories of production, exchange, and use across and among a number of social and institutional settings' and connect with lived experiences of archivists and researchers.⁴

In this context the archive of the West Australian Department of Indigenous Affairs (DIA) is eminently worthy of study.⁵ This sprawling collection is a tangible artefact of state power. Documenting seventy-four years of colonial hegemony and totalitarian control over Aboriginal people from 1898 to 1972, it has been likened to the relic instrument of 'a repressive regime' in the manner of the Stasi records of former East Germany.⁶ The regime's operations, dutifully recorded and secretly guarded by its administrators, caused feverish controversy once they became archival

documents open to the public. Ironically, the archive also contained a treasure trove of stories that proved invaluable to Aboriginal people researching family and community histories. These stories also inspired Aboriginal writers who combined them with community memories to create major works of theatre, literature, history and film.

I was fortunate to come to the DIA archive after first learning from Noongar people of their community memories about family, country and their particular challenges and achievements. I have also lived for many years as part of my Noongar partner's extended family. These influences immeasurably enriched my reading of the archive and also shaped much of my writing from a doctoral thesis in 1986 to *Spinning the Dream: Assimilation in Australia* published in 2008.

Aboriginal researchers face specific challenges in using the archive to create Indigenous history as academic Lynette Russell explains:

I understood that the archival knowledge I would uncover was not Indigenous *per se* but rather was western or colonial knowledge about Indigenous people and their cultures. [...] it was archival texts within which Indigenous people were the object (and subject) of the gaze of colonial authorities and 'experts'.⁷

Of the DIA archive Steve Kinnane and Lauren Marsh note their discomfort with its 'subjectivity [...] being that these archives speak from the voice of a European'.⁸ Aboriginal voices are generally absent. What the archive speaks about is the governance of subject Aboriginal populations through rulings, judgments, instructions, economies and calculations and their sickness, deaths, punishments, removals, institutionalisation and dire living conditions. The general lack of humanity is distressing for any reader but for Aboriginal people reading about their families it can be devastating.

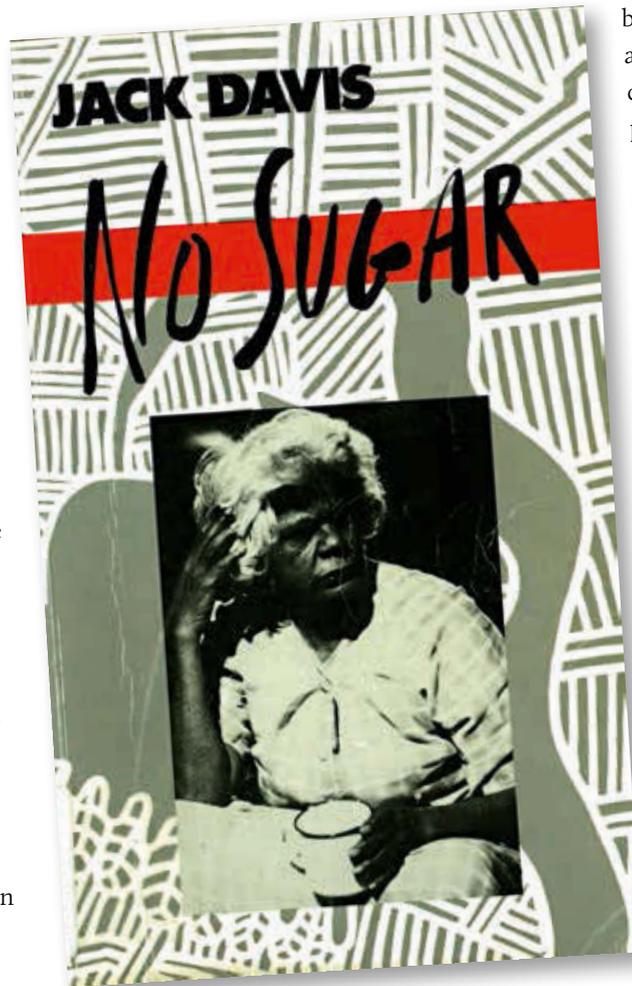
In addition Aboriginal researchers have to negotiate what Russell has described as the 'incommensurable ontologies' of Western and Indigenous knowledge systems. However, she and archivist colleagues are re-evaluating the potential for genuine interaction between the two paradigms. The new position is that archives are not immutable artefacts of the past but that archival knowledge shifts as it interacts with society: archives are 'both fixed and mutating as they continue to fulfill their multiple purposes'.⁹ Concerning Indigenous knowledge systems, they are not static relics of the past but are 'utterly modern [...] dynamic and adaptive' and 'continually influenced by internal creativity and experimentation as well as by contact with external systems'.¹⁰ Interaction between these two ontologies can bring

positive transformations when circumstances of equality and respect support Indigenous knowledge and activities and promote mutual communication and decision-making.¹¹ In this way archival knowledge recorded about Aboriginal people can be reabsorbed as Indigenous knowledge.

We can see this in Aboriginal writers' use of the DIA archive, although conditions were rarely ideal. From the 1980s writers in Perth began negotiating between the archives and their own community stories and produced a burst of major works combining both. Working across various genres of history, biography, family memoir, fiction, theatre and film (sometimes in collaboration with non-Aboriginal researchers), they achieved national success. The enriched storytelling powers are evident in Jack Davis's internationally renowned play *No Sugar*, first performed in 1985 at the Perth Festival. Director Andrew Ross recalls the creative research process

for the play with Davis drawing on his own memories and both men interviewing Noongar people to collect 'a view of the events from their point of view' and then spending 'weeks and weeks every day in the archive, systematically going through material. It was exciting slowly building up a picture of those events and the circumstances around those events, the world in which they took place.'¹²

Government archives like the DIA archive originate as operational records that are produced by the department and systematically



(above)
Cover of *No Sugar*
by Jack Davis
(Currency Press,
1986).

organised for re-use and reference. Then, at a certain point in their history, they are transferred to an archival repository for conservation, preservation and public research. The biography of the DIA archive begins in foundational principles of policy, legislation and administration established in the first decade of the twentieth century that set the parameters of segregation, neglect and punitive controls that characterised administration of Aboriginal affairs in Western Australia for the next sixty years.¹³ Yet there was also a fallibility shaped by changing historical pressures and the enormous challenges of distance, communication, racism, limited resources and resistance to governmental policies. Like other colonial archives it was the product of an ‘unsettled’ mesh of ‘uncertain knowledge’ fashioned out of ‘events on the ground, laws and duties, bureaucratic need and pressures’ into an ‘unruly, piecemeal venture’.¹⁴

Two legislative acts established the overarching principles of Aboriginal governance. The 1897 Aborigines Act wrested control from the British Colonial Office, slashed funding and created an impossible administrative structure with a central office in Perth and volunteer agents dotted around the state. The act applied to ‘Aboriginal natives’ and ‘half-castes living with natives’. The policy was benevolent protection: providing rations for the dying remnants of Aboriginal people and removing their children to missions. The real agenda was to ensure unhindered colonial progress and settlement. The 1905 Aborigines Act consolidated the department’s power and control, institutionalised neglectful care of Aboriginal people and legalised racial discrimination at all levels. Official policy remained protection but in practice segregation and dispossession took precedence. The department’s duties were now all-encompassing but funding remained minimal.

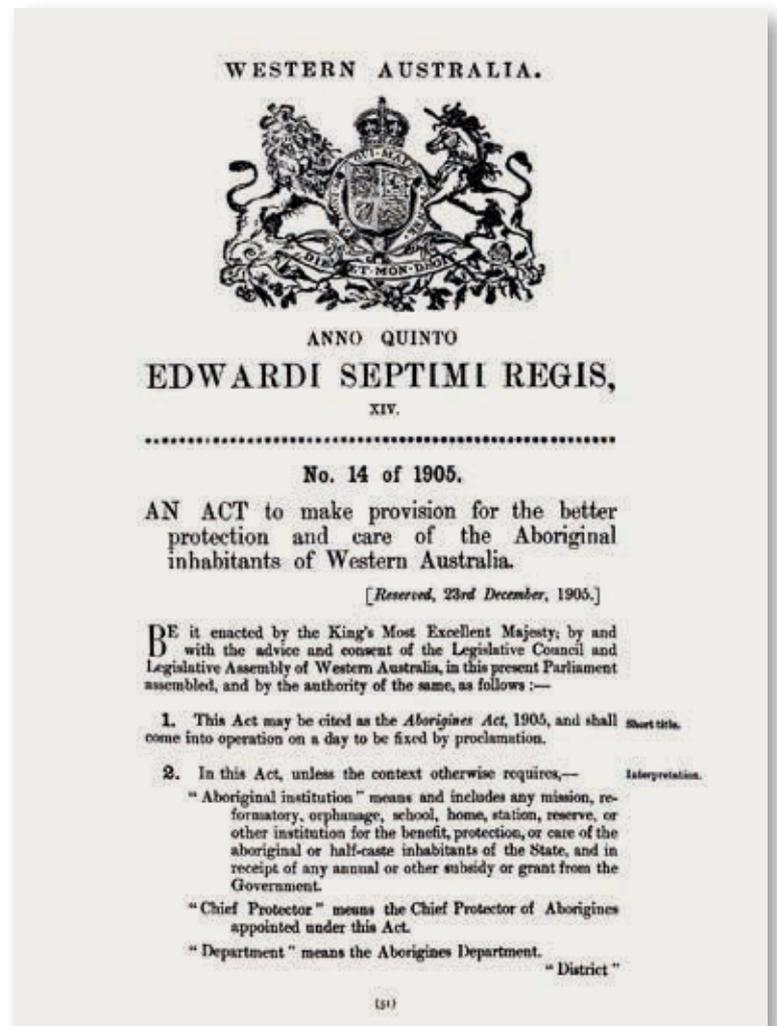
Department files show these principles in action: the negligent segregated services; unprecedented powers to control Aboriginal employment, marriage, sexual contact, children, movement, residence, access to land and use of guns and alcohol; and special powers to discipline and punish. Amendments and regulations facilitated a creeping growth

of legislative controls over the years. Still the department remained largely unaccountable and overlooked by government.

In managing Aboriginal populations the state was divided into the frontier regions of the pastoral north and desert areas and the settled agricultural south. This grid was imposed over the diversity of Aboriginal cultures and lands. English was the language of administration; occasional Aboriginal personal names were the only reminder in the files of languages still widely spoken. Records were ordered according to administrative priorities and jacketed by subject and number as they were created from the beginning of each year. Their titles named Aboriginal people, staff members, volunteers acting locally for the department—police, resident magistrates, pastoralists, doctors and ministers; and they mapped out sites of surveillance and control: reserves, camps, institutions, prohibited areas

(below)
Opening page of
**Aborigines Act 1905
(WA).**

NATIONAL LIBRARY OF
AUSTRALIA. NLA. CAT.
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(above)
Mr A. O. Neville,
Commissioner for
Native Affairs, 1940.

PHOTO: STATE LIBRARY
OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA
<5000B VOL. 106>

and places of employment, and duties such as rationing, removals, discipline and enforcing controls generally. Some files contained letters from Aboriginal people protesting their treatment or pleading for justice, like this Aboriginal father:

I am afraid that [my wife] will cimitt
sueside if the boy is not back soon for she
is good for nothing only cry day and night
[...] I have as much love for my der wife and
churldines as you have for yours... so if you
have any feeling atole pleas send the boy
back as quick as you can it did not take long
for him to go but it takes a long time for him
to come back.¹⁵

The Chief Protector of Aborigines held the reigns of power; combined with limited accountability this created the potential for a personal fiefdom. Early appointments plucked from the colonial elite proved weak and ineffectual but this changed dramatically in

1915 with the appointment of Auber Octavius Neville. During his 25 years in office Neville positioned himself to dominate the department as his own, setting policy, directing legislation, accruing institutions and controlling minutiae of the daily lives of Aboriginal people. Neville's aggressive leadership inspired many of the later creative works by Aboriginal writers, drawing on Aboriginal memories and Neville's own meticulously kept records.

Neville was a British-born career public servant with little to recommend him apart from a sound public service record and his determination to tackle identified Aboriginal problems around the state. He appeased settler colonists' demands for segregation in the south by building the Carrolup and Moore River native settlements to accommodate families forced out of town camps and their children excluded from state schools. There the adults eked out their remaining days while children were trained to become laborers and domestic servants. Segregation of services in centralised institutions left families with no safety net apart from lifelong detention in the settlements or minimal rations outside and Noongar poverty escalated.

Neville also shaped the disorganised departmental records into a well-oiled system; the principles of the DIA archive and the bulk of its records were created under his watch. He streamlined the recording, listing, indexing, sorting and retrieving of files: with reliable information close at hand he could improve management across the state. This meant accumulating and filing all decisions, actions, interventions, surveillance, family and personal details and data for planning and reports. What was lacking was a parallel system to provide transparency and accountability. Neville also introduced the first centralised card systems and registers for ready access to vital statistics: issue of rations, blankets, tents and clothing; tallies of permits, agreements, recognisances, gun licenses and exemptions granted; Aboriginal convictions generally; breaches by Aboriginal people or others of the 1905 Act; registrations of Aboriginal marriages and deaths (but rarely births).

To ensure enforcement of the 1905 Act Neville replaced local volunteers with police

officers appointed as Protectors of Aborigines. His actions to ensure that they carried out their duties proved effective. For example, the quota of Aboriginal workers legally employed under special work permits under the 1905 Act doubled in 1916 and in the southwest alone leapt from 34 to 200.¹⁶ That this further eroded Aboriginal rights was less important to Neville

to send a ten-year-old girl to Moore River settlement on the grounds that she had 'physical and mental weakness' and would 'probably die' if she left her mother. She was not sent away but he could not save her brother and sister from being removed.¹⁷

In 1920 Neville was transferred to the Department of the North West but returned

THAT THIS FURTHER ERODED ABORIGINAL RIGHTS WAS LESS IMPORTANT TO NEVILLE THAN MAINTAINING THE LETTER OF THE LAW.

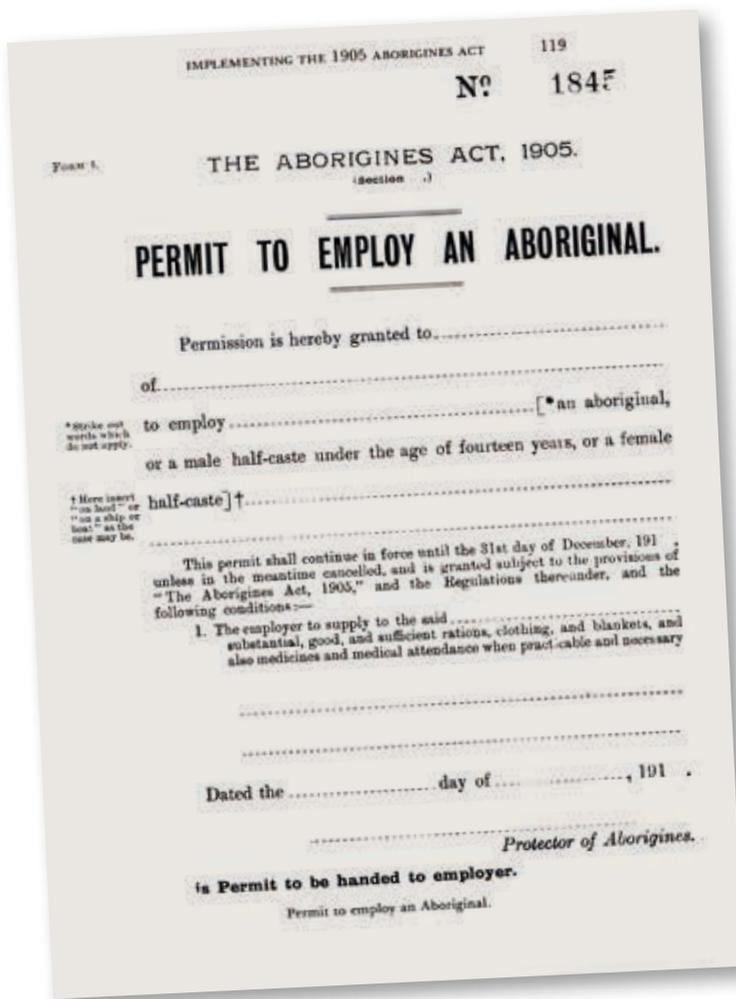
than maintaining the letter of the law. The new system increased the families' vulnerability to punitive surveillance and harassment and the potential for removal of their children. They survived by closely monitoring the police and making themselves invisible to them. There were some rare acts of kindness. In 1923 at Gascoyne Junction, Police Constable Slater refused to obey Neville's repeated instructions

in 1926 to his office in Murray Street, Perth. From there he struggled to manage growing complaints about town camps and also protests from Aboriginal people including the state's first Aboriginal deputation to a West Australian Premier in 1928. Neville's woes escalated into the 1930s as depression economies stretched his resources to the limit: his budget was cut by 20 percent in 1931 when 1240 Aborigines in the south were drawing rations (there were only 326 doing so in 1926).¹⁸

An iconic Noongar memory of Neville at this time is of a beleaguered despot directing Aboriginal people to wait their turn at the back of his office, waving files and shouting into the phone to the police while dictating missives to his secretary pounding away on her typewriter. Variations of this scene have been reconstructed in the feature film *Rabbit Proof Fence* and documentaries *Black Magic* (1988), *Coolbaroo Club* (1996) and *Case 452* (2000).

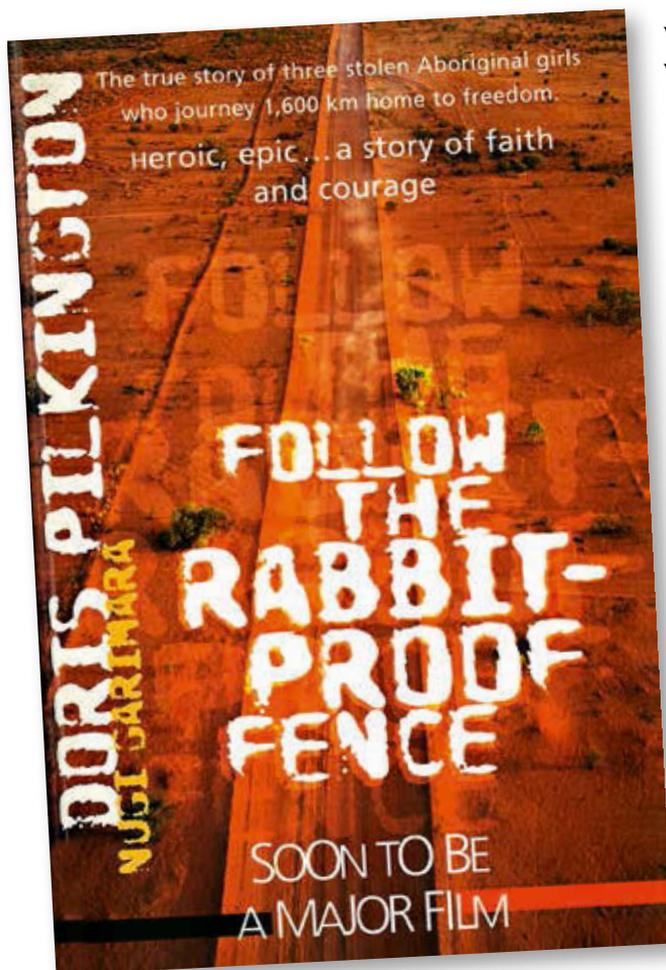
No Sugar also has a scene in Mr Neville's office. We see Neville dictating a list of arrest warrants to his secretary Miss Dunn. He then hurriedly turns to address a waiting police sergeant:

NEVILLE: Right, I don't want to delay you, so we'll deal with the matter in hand.



(left) Permit to Employ an Aboriginal (Implementing the 1905 Aborigines Act).

COURTESY ANNA HAEBICH



Miss Dunn, would you bring the Northam file, please, and the warrants? ... Well, I've got all the warrants, following your own census, Sergeant a total of eighty-nine natives.

[He hands over the warrants]

If the list changes at all, let me know and I'll obtain any additional warrants. It's essential that the town and shire be quite devoid of natives after the seventeenth.¹⁹

The DIA records confirm Neville's increasing exasperation. He began to make serious errors of judgment. Davis's play *No Sugar* tells the story of one of his more audacious actions at the time. At the height of the depression during the 1932 election year Neville, acting as the agent of Premier Collier who was also member for the electorate of Northam, arranged for between 80 and 90 Noongar people to be arrested and transferred under police warrant from their camps near the town to Moore River native settlement, which

was already dangerously overcrowded, with 500 residents in rundown shelters designed for 200. The pretext was that some had a minor contagious skin disease but no symptoms were found on their arrival at Moore River. In fact, the Premier had engineered their removal to appeal to the voters of Northam. The Collier government lost the 1932 election with Collier also losing his seat, but still the Noongar families were detained and threatened with arrest if they attempted to return home.

Further examples of Neville's erratic behavior are documented in Doris Pilkington's family memoir, *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* (1996). Drawing on the DIA archive and family memories, Pilkington recounts the extraordinary feat of how her mother and two aunts, all young girls, escaped from Moore River settlement in 1931 and trekked overland following the rabbit-proof fence. Pilkington juxtaposes the warm flow of family storytelling with the terse language and content of the files as she narrates how Neville and the

police pursued the girls in order to return them to the settlement, allegedly for their own safety and protection. Pilkington's counter history, fortified by Neville's own words, suggests his motives had more to do with saving face and money than charitable benevolence. With two girls back home in Jigalong, Neville instructed the police to take no action against fourteen-year-old Molly since 'very heavy expenditure was incurred in securing her, and when she decamped a lot of undesirable publicity took place'. Concerning Daisy, aged thirteen, he advised 'I would like the child recovered if no great expense is to be incurred; otherwise the prestige of the Department is likely to suffer.' He spent ten weeks arguing with police in Wiluna over costs for the third girl's daily rations and travel back to Moore River.²⁰

Neville must have found solace in his expanding record system. Kinnane and Marsh counted over 27,000 new files established between 1926 and 1959, many created before Neville's retirement in 1940. They now looked more professional, being typed not

(above)

Cover of *Follow The Rabbit Proof Fence* by Doris (Garimara) Pilkington (University of Queensland Press, 2000).

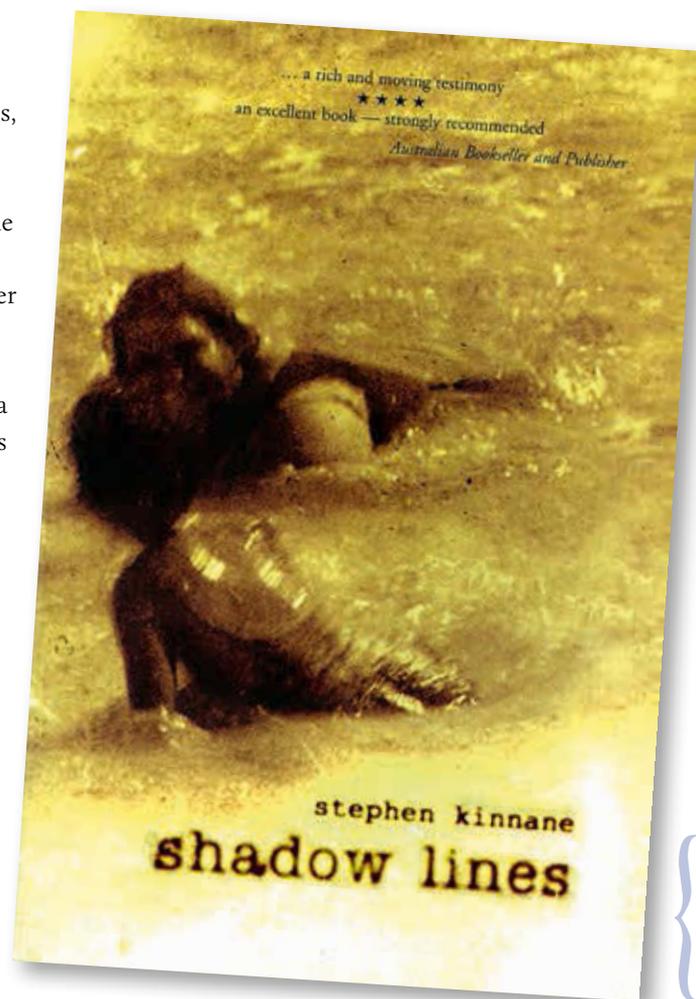
handwritten, and their titles more uniform. Neville's innovation of personal files became the principal record category comprising 54 percent of all new records. With an estimated state Aboriginal population of only 15,000 people this indicates the level of surveillance operating.²¹

Personal files provided a powerful apparatus for invasive micro-management of individual lives. Particular targets of Neville's personal file strategy were girls like Steve Kinnane's grandmother who were removed to institutions and then sent out to domestic service under department control. Kinnane obtained a copy of *File no 1261/21—Jessie Argyle Personal File*, which was three hundred pages thick. Revealed in its pages of notes, correspondence and police reports were the details of her life made known to Neville between 1923 to 1936: her employment and wages, requests for her earnings, her personal spending, medical problems, friendships and spats, boyfriends (all objected to by Neville), her courtship and marriage to Steve's grandfather and the continued police spying on their home in East Perth. Creatively weaving together archival information and family memories, Kinnane wrote *Shadow Lines* (2003), a powerful biography of his grandmother and the Perth world she inhabited. Still, he calls the files 'double-edged': while they enabled him to reconstruct the story of her life it would have been 'preferable' if the files and 'the culture that created them also did not exist'. In a poignant scene of a visit with his mother to his grandmother's first employer, Kinnane describes how he deliberately placed her personal file on the table for all to see. But as memories were shared over cups of tea and cake the file remained unopened and untouched, a silent reminder of the many painful stories in Jessie's life.²²

Neville was also positioning himself as the creator and gatekeeper of knowledge about Aboriginal people and their culture and history. He shaped public understanding of colonial history in lectures and journal articles. In *No Sugar* Davis shows Neville reading his 1936 speech to the Royal Western

Historical Society where he controversially draws similarities between Aboriginal depopulation in Tasmania and the southwest of Western Australia. In the early 1930s, writing under a *nom de plume* in the *West Australian* newspaper, he advocated his controversial new policy of biological absorption. Neville angered anthropologists visiting the Kimberley by seeking to control and even censor their research. A. P. Elkin later referred to him as 'a person who, by the light of Nature, thinks he knows all about Aborigines'.²³ During the 1934 Moseley Royal Commission into Aboriginal conditions in the state, Neville interjected and corrected witnesses, including Aboriginal people who braved his retribution to state their case.

Race mixing weighed heavily on Neville's mind and he was especially alarmed by statistics showing the dramatic increase of the 'mixed race' population in the south, from 1603 in 1919 to 2616 in 1936.²⁴ Under his watch the department's record system came



(left)
Cover of *Shadow Lines* by Stephen Kinnane (Fremantle Press, 2003).

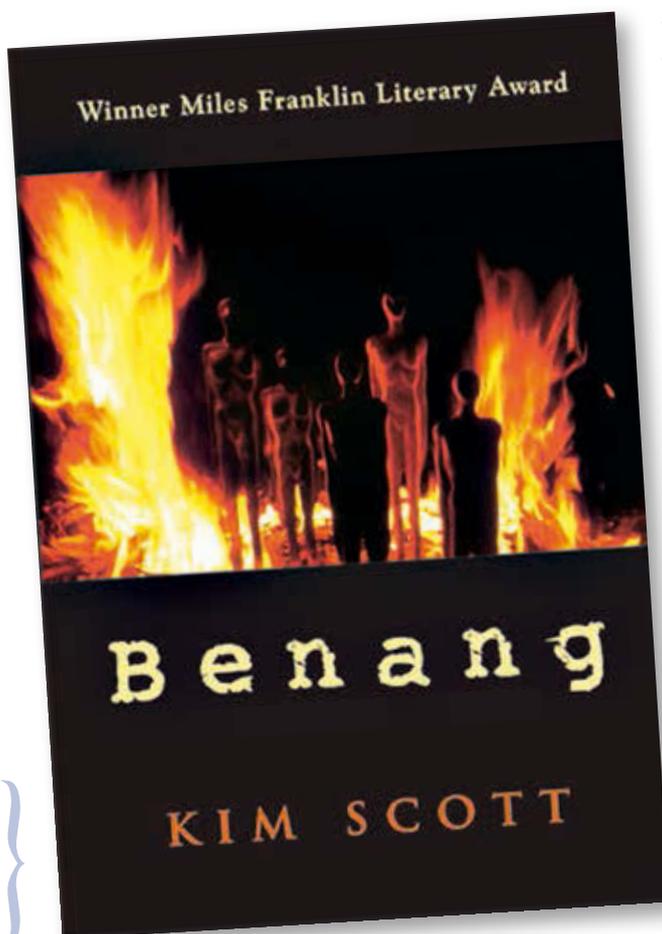
to resemble an alarming ‘racial archive’.²⁵ His expanding family card genealogies, as detailed as any of Francis Galton’s eugenic charts, and the personal files provided an administrative apparatus to divide Aboriginal people into distinct categories that set them apart from each other, sometimes even their own children, and segregated them from settler colonists. Fractional calculations on file covers are proof that determining racial classifications was not always simple. Once caught, the only avenue of escape was to apply for exemptions under the 1905 Act, which were rarely granted.

Ann Stoler reminds us that racial categories are not fixed but are ‘mutating ontologies’ that can be reformulated ‘again and again’ according to historical exigencies.²⁶ In the 1930s when National Socialist Germany was recasting its definitions of Aryan and Jew, Neville proposed to extend existing racial definitions to include ‘quadroons’ and even lighter castes. Neville achieved his goal in the 1936 amending legislation that adopted the policy of biological absorption. The solution was to ‘breed out’ Aboriginal physical and

cultural characteristics by pressuring lighter castes to marry white, thereby providing the ultimate solution. Neville’s retirement in 1940 and the outbreak of war prevented wholesale implementation of the policy, but the files record children being classified according to color with the ‘nearly white’ children being sent to Sister Kate’s Quarter Caste Children’s Home in Perth to be groomed for their ‘ultimate absorption’.²⁷ In 1947 Neville published *Australia’s Coloured Minority: Its Place in the Community* where he famously wrote ‘the native must be helped in spite of himself [...] the end in view will justify the means applied’.²⁸

Kim Scott’s multi-award winning novel *Benang* (1999) is in part a profound response to Neville’s distorted vision and its historical context of reformulated race ontologies and eugenic manipulation for purposes of racial elimination, or purification.²⁹ It is also a personal response to Neville’s treatment of Noongar families gleaned from Scott’s own family memories and the archive. Scott’s protagonist Harley, presented as the ‘first white man born’, is the outcome of a eugenicist experiment conducted by his own grandfather along the lines of Neville’s absorption policy and similar programmes in other Western nations at the time. The shock of Harley’s realisation as he looks through papers in his grandfather’s office surely mirrors an anguished generalised Aboriginal response to the realisation that Neville, who was legal guardian of Aboriginal children to the age of twenty-one, subjected those under his care to this diabolical experimentation. In the way that so many removed children have searched out their birth families to find their identities, Harley attempts to reverse the experiment and reconnect with his Noongar family and culture.³⁰

In 1948 Western Australia began a major period of reform with the adoption of the policy of assimilation and appointment of a determined new Commissioner to lead the charge. This would transform Neville’s closed shop into a modern, outward-looking department. The goal of assimilation was that Aboriginal people would



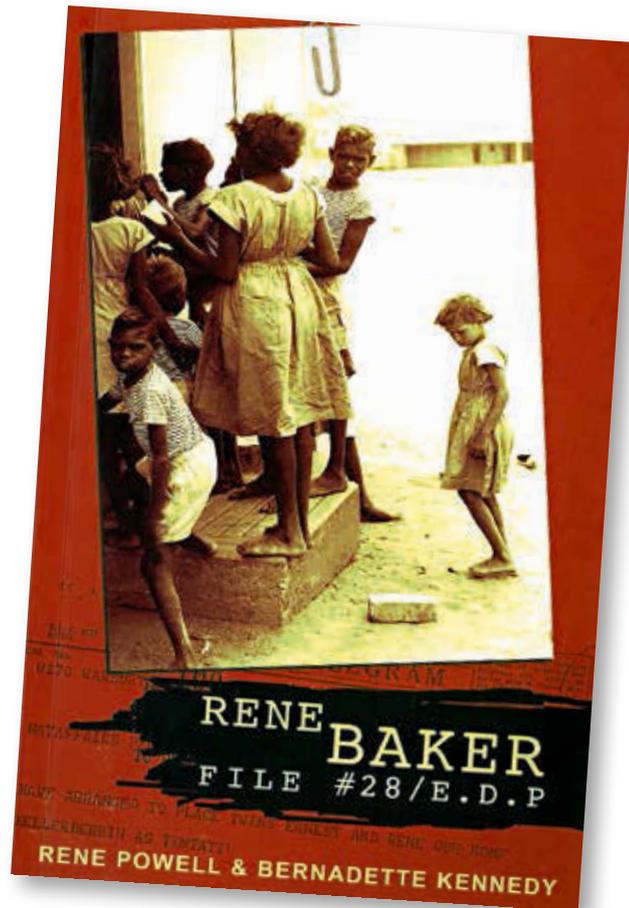
(right)
Cover of *Benang—From the Heart* by Kim Scott (Fremantle Press, 1999).

become citizens living in suburbs and towns 'like white Australians do'. The reforms required to achieve this were daunting: repeal of all discriminatory legislation to bring full citizenship; dismantling the department and mainstreaming services and benefits; and desegregating West Australian society. Few members of the public supported these changes. Nor were there sufficient resources to alleviate endemic Aboriginal poverty and raise living conditions to community standards. It was also the case that some Aboriginal people resented the imposed changes to their way of life, although most welcomed better living conditions and the opportunity of schooling for their children.

The new Commissioner, Stanley Middleton, was a former senior bureaucrat in the Papua New Guinea field service with the necessary experience and proactive stance. His catchcry was 'assimilation into the general community on the basis of reasonable equality in all facets of community life'.³¹ Middleton genuinely sought to move the department into an interim welfare role and then redundancy. He began by replacing police with a field system along the Papua New Guinea model. He stopped segregated services and transferred responsibility to mainstream departments, beginning with health, schooling and then child welfare and housing. He supported federal social service benefits for Aboriginal people to replace rations and blankets and pushed for speedy legislative reform to make Aboriginal citizenship a reality.

The DIA archive records reflect Middleton's initiatives. Files were now stamped Department of Native Welfare. The new decentralised record system that directly linked head office with patrol officers in the field now had file titles like '38/1949 District Officer of Natives Journal'. The titles also showed the new cooperation between government departments: '921/1949 Education of Natives Policy General Correspondence' and '412/1960 Housing for Natives State Housing and Private. General Correspondence'.

These changes were grafted onto the old system that resisted modernisation. Middleton recorded his growing frustrations in the files.



He was outraged by political opposition to the repeal of laws that were 'repugnant to basic humanitarian and welfare principles' and 'unparalleled in the legislative treatment of any other people in the Commonwealth or Pacific territories'.³² He was shocked by Neville's personal files and 'caste' cards with their 'obsessively mapped and meticulously recorded' fractions as far as '21/23rds' and suggested in a note to his Minister that their 'accidental destruction' would be of 'untold benefit'.³³ He was deeply shocked by conditions in the native settlements where 'inmates' sat 'absolutely silent and just stared...[saying] not a word'.³⁴

Middleton had good reason to distance himself from the old files. Of particular concern were practices of removing and institutionalising Aboriginal children. A confidential report in 1949 about conditions for children at Carrolup settlement listed unhygienic conditions amounting to 'gross neglect', 'barbarous' dormitories, insufficient food and inadequate ablutions, and warned of serious epidemics if the situation continued.³⁵ In late 1952 Middleton handed the former settlement over to the Baptist Aborigines

(above)

Cover of *Rene Baker File #28/E.D.P.* by Rene Powell and Bernadette Kennedy (Fremantle Press, 2005).

Mission. Evidence concerning outright illegalities also set alarm bells ringing. In 1950 Middleton had warned his Minister about 'illegal and unsatisfactory procedures' in the past when the department had 'seldom, if ever' obtained ministerial warrants for the committal of children to institutions as required by law and he advised that Aboriginal parents could have taken legal action against the department.³⁶

Fifty years later Rene Powell was shocked to read Middleton's comments in an archive file while researching her removal from Warburton Mission in 1952. Powell and her co-researcher and writer Bernadette Kennedy concluded that her case was one of many 'not so legal' removals of Aboriginal children in Western Australia. They were convinced that Middleton's drive to mainstream child welfare was motivated as much by 'fear of litigation as by any desire for justice'. They published their findings in the book, *Rene Baker File #28/E.D.P.* (2005), using multi-voice narratives, with the authors explaining their reasons

for writing the book, and with voices of administrators, missionaries and police quoted from the files juxtaposed with the contrasting accounts of Powell's removal told by her Ngaanyatjara family.³⁷

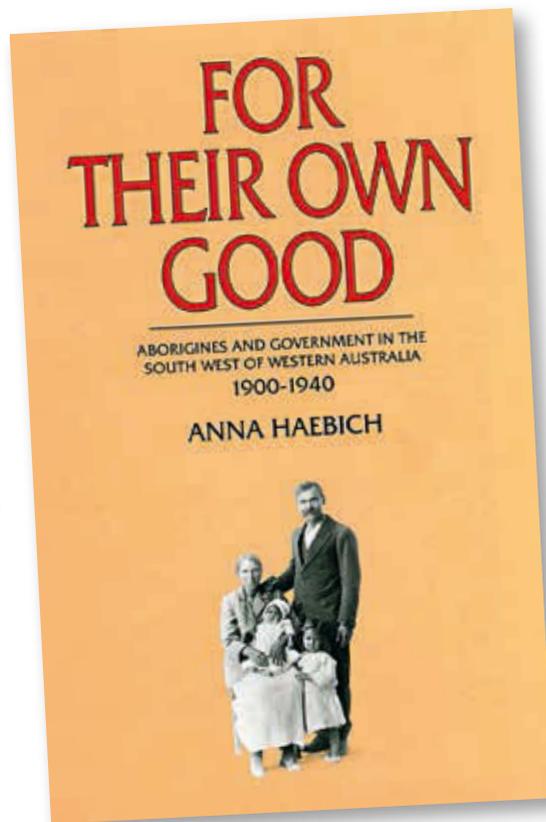
It is likely that Middleton's concerns contributed to the destruction of files that began in 1938 but escalated during the 1950s. Using the card registers Kinnane and Marsh calculated the percentages of files destroyed as 55 percent of administrative files, 21 percent of personal files and 71 percent of staff files. At the same time, they noted how this was tempered

from the late 1950s by growing appreciation of the historic value of the state's archival records, beginning with the appointment of a State Archivist in 1945, the archiving of records in the J. S. Battye Library of West Australian History and State Archives from 1956, and the appointment of a Records Committee in 1958 to oversee disposal schedules for departments. It was not until the 1990s that there were calls for a moratorium on the destruction of invaluable Aboriginal records.³⁸

The year 1972 saw thousands of carefully maintained and guarded records begin their final transfer to the archival repository for storage, conservation, preservation and public research. For the DIA files this did not mean retirement but a new era of fevered controversy. The catalyst for change was the 1972 Aboriginal Affairs Planning Authority Act that dismantled the department and repealed the last discriminatory laws. The new Aboriginal Affairs Planning Authority had only limited operational functions and the Department of Community Welfare now managed Aboriginal child and family welfare. The records were

split up between the Planning Authority and the Department of Community Welfare and historical files over 30 years old were cleared and moved in batches over several years to be managed by the State Archivist in the Battye Library. Then began the archival processes of listing, shelving and microfilming records for access by researchers.

In 1979, while Western Australians celebrated 150 years of colonial settlement and progress, a new vanguard of social historians were constructing very different accounts of the past using the DIA archive. Already in



(above)
Cover of *For Their Own Good: Aborigines and Government in the Southwest of Western Australia, 1900-1940* by Anna Haebich (UWA Publishing, 1988).

1973 archivist Peter Biskup had published his classic study of policy and practice in Western Australia, *Not Slaves Not Citizens*. Many more radical histories would follow including my own book, *For Their Own Good: Aborigines and Government in the Southwest of Western Australia* (1992), that combined archival research and Noongar accounts of the past.

In these politically charged times controversy was inevitable. The first official act of obstruction was by the Minister for Police, Bill Hassell, who in 1980 banned access to all police records about Aborigines in retaliation for the alleged defamation of the family of a serving senior police officer by historian Andrew Gill in a respectable academic journal.³⁹ In the following year, now wearing the hat of Minister for Community Welfare, Hassell embargoed use of the DIA archive as well after a researcher allegedly breached classified material; he also threatened prosecutions. Aboriginal leaders joined with historians to dispute the government's draconian efforts to gag research.⁴⁰

However, prohibitions continued while the files were carefully assessed and designated as permanently 'restricted' or as 'open' for access to *bona fide* researchers.

By the mid-1980s Aboriginal families were also seeking access to the archive. Passions ran high as they read the often derogatory and misinformed information recorded in terse bureaucratic language. Information in many personal files was so private and contentious that the Department of Community Welfare introduced a further embargo while it developed its policy to restrict access to the

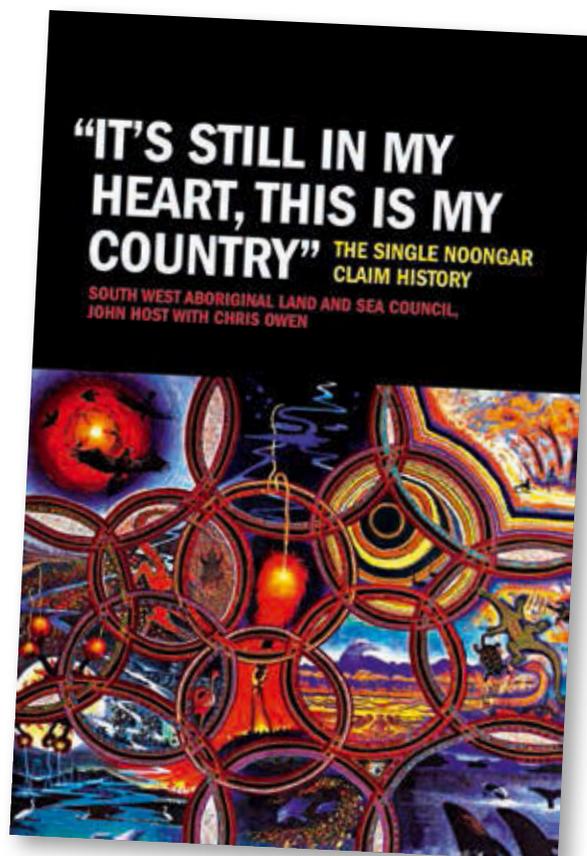
individual concerned or, if deceased, their immediate descendants. Later the department developed a one-stop service providing support for family history research and counseling.

For many of the Stolen Generations these records were the lifelines back to their mothers and families. The documentary, *Case 442 A Son's Journey to Find his Mother*, directed by Mitch Torres, tells how Mr Frank Byrne found his mother in the file for Department of Community Welfare Case 442 as well as the details of his forced removal to Beagle Bay Mission north of Broome. His mother's

story was tragic: after her son was taken she had a breakdown and was sent to a psychiatric hospital in Perth where she spent her remaining years and was buried nearby. The film shows Mr Byrne grieving at his mother's grave and then his determined efforts to successfully return his mother's remains for burial in her traditional country near Fitzroy Crossing in the Kimberley.⁴¹

Controversially, the West Australian

government continued to validate the 'truth' of the DIA archive over Aboriginal oral history and memory by obliging Aboriginal people to produce evidence from its records in various claim matters. In a cruel irony this included proving the case for monetary compensation by the Stolen Generations and for Stolen Wages mismanaged by the government. The archive also became a vital source for Land Councils and Native Title claimants to demonstrate ongoing connections to land and culture. In 2009 the South West Land and Sea Council published *It's Still in My Heart, This is My Country*, a definitive



(above left)
Cover of 'It's Still in My Heart, This is My Country': The Single Noongar Claim History by the South West Aboriginal Land and Sea Council, John Host with Chris Owen (UWA Publishing, 2009).

history of colonisation in Noongar country based on the history report for the Single Noongar Claim that drew together archival research and Noongar oral histories.

During the 1990s simmering tensions erupted into a national campaign for Aboriginal control of the archives. Aboriginal leaders in two national government inquiries, both men from Western Australia, led the way: Pat Dodson in the 1991 *Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody* and Mick Dodson in the 1997 *Bringing Them Home Report* on Australia's Stolen Generations.⁴² Mick Dodson drew on international conventions and principles when he asserted that the child removals were genocidal and gross violations of human rights and that it was the responsibility of state and federal governments to return records of their genocidal policies to the victims. This would restore knowledge vital for their healing and survival as Indigenous people. Dodson recommended a human rights framework for the archives based on self-determination, non-discrimination and cultural renewal.

There was a muted response to Dodson's recommendations from the Western Australian government. Significant change only began with the 2001 State Records Act that established the State Records Office, independent of the State Library, and charged it to review the status of all DIA restricted files. Thousands were subsequently reclassified as open access. Indexes and guides to the DIA archive were digitised though few files. The Records Office follows the now outdated 1997 *Policy Statement on Archival Services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples* and the 2005 *Protocol for Libraries, Archives, and Information* drawn up by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Library and Information Resources Network.⁴³

Nationally, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander archivists and colleagues continue to pursue a human rights agenda, now through the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples adopted by Australia in 2009, and have produced national statements based on the declaration concerning Indigenous knowledge, archives and human rights. In Melbourne the Koori Trust and Technology

Project (2004–8) has investigated strategies for Kurri people to become 'co-creators' of archival records using 'Indigenous knowledge, memory and frameworks of evidence'. In 2010 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner Mick Gooda called for a 'resettling of relationships' between Aboriginal people and the archives through a process described by Marcia Langton and Martin Nakata as 'dialogue, conversation, education, and working through things together [...] and means for Indigenous people to be part of what they determine should be done'.⁴⁴ The creative works by West Australian writers cited here are testimonies to what can be achieved. They show the passionate, rich storytelling that emerges when Aboriginal people engage with the archives that once controlled their lives and, armed with their shared memories and cultural knowledge, release and transform the hidden meanings and forgotten stories captured within them. ¶



ANNA HAEBICH FAHA FASSA is an internationally regarded historian known for her interdisciplinary research into Australia's recent past. Best known is her book **Broken**

Circles, the first national history of Australia's Stolen Generations. Her current research explores the history of Aboriginal public performance in Western Australia. Anna is currently John Curtin Distinguished Professor at Curtin University.

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