

The Black of Bourke:

Bourke, NSW

[I worked for a while as a freelance play-builder, travelling from place to place around rural New South Wales. As a sideline I wrote short social commentaries on some of the towns I visited. This was one of the ones published in *Nation Review*.]

The road to Bourke is littered with sinister omens: the arthritic ghosts of eucalypts and sagging fence-wire, posts and poles toppling into the red dust. Even from the air-conditioned comfort of the coach, you can feel the lethargy of it, seeping in as you gaze limply at the horizon.

‘Soldier, Jesus is Your Saviour’ blares for the third time from the speakers overhead, and there’s a moment’s temptation to lean forward and ask the driver to change the tape; but there are enough nodding heads and tapping feet around to make me think better of it. This is the home of fundamentalist thought; people out here actually *believe* that sort of double-think, and making a point of my objection is hardly the kind of thing that’s likely to make the project any easier to carry through.

The local support scheme for unemployed youth had set it up, a week long video-drama exercise to try to build a bit of motivation and confidence among the kids. I jumped at the chance, partly because I needed the money, but also because I’d never been that far west before, and I was curious to know what it was like.

Nothing I experienced in my time there has convinced me that my initial ominous impression of the town was mistaken. Bourke is one of those places that should serve to remind Australia that, however manicured the front garden, there are still a few dog-turds in the backyard.

The further west one travels, it seems, the more frequently one encounters bigotry. No doubt there is a close relationship between geographic isolation and intolerance, partly owing to the greater effectiveness of powerful interest groups in dominating local affairs and partly because of the lack of moderating influences from outside.

The source of political strength in any community is economic power, and in Bourke that is the province of the local meat-works. When I rang the manager on Monday afternoon to request an interview he agreed, rather reluctantly, to an interview in front of camera, but looked decidedly seedy when a group of young Aborigines flooded into his office the following morning. Suddenly it was ‘inconvenient’.

The kids didn’t seem surprised, because ‘aboriginal’ is a dirty word for many of them, too. Young, black and unemployed is bad news in the best of circumstances, which certainly don’t apply in Bourke. None of the kids are interested in travelling to the city to work, though, leaving home, friends and the familiar on the off-chance of a factory job that, if the accounts of some are to be believed, may not exist when they get there.

The trappings of government concern are there in Bourke; there’s a black face behind the counter in the CES office, and the Department of Aboriginal Affairs has an office just off the

main street. But reference to these evokes a cynical response from the black community, many of whom feel that such ‘white’ institutions are merely another aspect of the welfare mentality that has dominated social policy towards Aborigines for the past hundred seventy years. There is no provision here for black aspirations, black culture, or the preservation of the black heritage.

The ghost of Colonel Sanders haunts the bars and beer garden of the commercial hotel, replete with white suit and hat, cadging a beer off anyone naieve enough to shout him one. ‘I got nothin’ against Abo’s,’ he tells me, in a one-sided conversation that began about something else. ‘It’s these bastards from the city that stir them up, communists and so on.’ He stares me straight in the eye. ‘They’re not a bad lot, really, if they’re left alone. They never used to complain before people started puttin’ ideas in their heads.’

There’s plenty to complain about. There are very few black faces among the permanents in the boning room; the Aborigines have to make the journey to the works, chasing the rumour that ‘it’s on’ five-miles across the desert to queue up awaiting the fickle nod of the foreman for a casual day’s work. Most have to walk back to town with empty pockets. It’s hard to avoid making the grim connection between this process and the drafting of stock; the destination, after all, is the same.

Working the chain may be degrading, but it’s just about all there is. That or the dole. Paradoxically, equal pay legislation has worked against aboriginal employment in traditional sectors such as farm labour, introducing greater competition for the few non-skilled jobs available. The one thing in the Aborigines’ favour – that their labour was cheaper – has been removed, and the station boss’s choice of who to employ is quite literally there in black and white.

The young blacks rule the streets at night, or hang around the pubs whose doors seem to grin with welcome. The age restriction is laxly enforced out here; boongs are apparently good for business.

Bourke is the domain of the Country Party, and the breeding ground of a political philosophy that’s about as close as you get in this country to neo-fascism. If you don’t believe it, take a video camera into the main street and ask around. The town is obsessively proud of its enlistment record – one of the highest in relation to population in New South Wales during the previous two world wars, and you get the distinct feeling there’s plenty of room left at the cenotaph if the balloon goes up again. It’s not just a matter of duty, or even glory; it’s a matter of faith.

Local issues in Bourke are kept local, handled by a town Council routinely elected by the ratepayers and supported by the land-owning and merchant lobbies. If things get tricky, there’s also an impressive law enforcement presence; nobody wants trouble, especially racial trouble, but they’ve recently doubled the police contingent, just in case.

One day the lid will blow off this can of worms, but meanwhile the local powerbrokers sit it out in the golf club, an oasis from which, after a few gin and tonics, it’s easy to imagine that everything’s okay. If you’re interested in an alternative view, take a walk through the ‘western

quarter', with it's sullen teenage alcoholics and blank eyes watching from the doorsteps as you pass by, to the edge of the town, and look out at the desert and think about it.

The workshop produced about half a dozen reels of raw tape, but the editing facility at the local high community radio station broke down half way through the edit, and the project was never finished. The image that sticks with me is the title, scratched in the dust where we videotaped it: 'A Hard One to Answer.'

I doubt that it would have made any difference anyway. The coaches will continue to come and go to Bourke; the galahs will still spread pink wings over a country too big to fence.