



Anna Haebich & Steve Mickler, *A Boy's Short Life: The Story of Warren Braedon/Louis Johnson*, UWA Publishing, Crawley, 2013; pp. 130; RRP AU\$17.99 paperback.

A Boy's Short Life first appeared as a chapter of Anna Haebich's award winning work *Broken Circles: Fragmenting Indigenous Families, 1800-2000* which was published by Fremantle Press in 2000 and provided a comprehensive national history of the Stolen Generations. Together with historian Steve Mickler, the chapter was revised and published as a stand-alone historical narrative by UWA Publishing in 2013. Its detailed analysis of Northern Territory government policy throughout the 20th century is anchored by a biography which documents the short life of Aboriginal man Louis Johnson, born Warren Braedon, in Alice Springs in 1973.

In their work, Haebich and Mickler present Louis Johnson as the human face of institutionalised discrimination in Australia. Their text reveals that his, like thousands of others, was a life, 'defined by the rules and conditions laid down by the British colonisation of the continent and the public attitudes, the laws and the social policy that flowed from this into the twentieth century' (p. xi). Through the text the authors track the sad symmetry between the chronology of Louis Johnson's short life and significant milestones for Indigenous people in modern Australia. Born into an impoverished and dispossessed Arrernte/Luritja family in 1973, (the same year that the Tent Embassy was established at Parliament House in Canberra), he died in 1992, months before the High Court handed down the *Mabo* judgment that overturned the doctrine of *terra nullius*. The description of the Stolen Generations as a 'social catastrophe engulfing Indigenous Australians' is borne out in the account of Louis Johnson's life experience.

Haebich and Mickler dedicate the first half of the text to an analysis of, what they describe as, *Aboriginal-specific* government policy in the Northern Territory. They consider the broad impacts (dispossession of lands, the breakup of families and communities) of colonialism, assimilation and self-determination for Indigenous communities in Alice Springs and assert that government measures of control were punitive and totalising. In their account, Haebich and Mickler reflect on the nature and purpose of a suite of legislative measures (the *Aboriginal Ordinance Acts* of 1911, 1939 and 1958, the *Child Welfare Ordinance 1958* and the *Children's Ordinance Act 1964*) which were introduced and used to justify the removal of fair-skinned Aboriginal children from their parents. For example, they argue that the *Aboriginal Ordinance Act of 1939* (to replace an Act of 1911) enshrined the principles of assimilation in law, and gave power to the Welfare Branch to 'manage' the everyday affairs of Aboriginal people by surveillance and heavy-handed interventionism, which contributed to an increasing dependency on government agencies.

The second half of the text provides a biography of Louis Johnson's life. The authors detail his upbringing, the circumstances around his forced removal and maternally unauthorised adoption, and describe his sad and premature death. They

rely heavily on their interviews with members of Louis Johnson's biological family to form a picture of his early life as one of four siblings in a five child family to be removed from their Luritja mother. Haebich and Mickler use statements made by Louis Johnson's adoptive parents to the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families in 1997 to supplement their own interviews with the couple, and to complete the narrative of Louis Johnson's life. In their statement, the Johnsons concede: 'We didn't understand the damage that was done by cross-cultural adoption and the part that cross-cultural adoption played in the enforced assimilation policy...to participate in an adoption that was specifically against the mother's wishes is doubly unjust' (p. 51). Haebich and Mickler contrast the openness and transparency of their interviews with Louis Johnson's biological and adoptive families with the impenetrable bureaucracy of Northern Territory government departments. They describe the ways in which their research was frustrated by government agencies who refused to release documents relating to the removal of Louis Johnson from his mother. This gap in knowledge is an unfortunate flaw in this otherwise thorough biography.

Through a comprehensive account of race relations in Western Australia through the 1980s and into the 1990s, Haebich and Mickler suggest that the public environment of Louis Johnson's adolescence was characterised by a 'noxious public air of fear and malevolence' (p. 67). They reflect on the disproportionate representation of Indigenous prisoners in (Western) Australian gaols, and the hysterical and overstated portrayal of Aboriginal youth crime in Perth in the 1990s. In their most compelling argument, Mickler and Haebich conclude that, because of its treatment of Louis Johnson, Australia 'cannot yet call itself postcolonial' (p. xiv). They urge that Australia needs to 'give proper political and legal effect to the principles of equality, self-determination and sovereignty' (p. xiv).

Haebich and Mickler's work is comprehensive, well researched and highly accessible. The decision of the authors to frame the text in their preface as one suitable to the 'contemporary *young* reader' should not limit its potential scope for readers of all ages. Louis Johnson was just nineteen when he died in tragic circumstances, his death the result of racially motivated violence and prejudicial medical treatment. It is thus, in this reviewer's opinion, an incredibly valuable case study of the very real effects of institutionalised racial violence in this country, and an important story to be told.

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