

THE ABORIGINES
and the
ROCKET RANGE

By DONALD F. THOMSON

O.B.E., D.Sc., Dip. Anthropol.

MAY, 1947

IN an article published in the Melbourne “Herald” in October last I expressed the view that “the proposal to conduct large scale tests with rocket weapons in Central Australia would, if carried out, spell final doom for the aborigines of that region”.

At that time the Minister for the Interior (Mr. Johnson), whom I believe to be sympathetic to the aborigines, stated that fears for the welfare of the aborigines were premature. Today the charge of “communism” is being laid at the door of those who oppose the violation of the Central Australian reserve, and whose sole motive is to save the remaining aborigines from sharing the fate of the Tasmanians—and the Victorians. I believe that the use of the Reserve as a rocket range will be fatal to the aborigines.

ONE point I wish to make clear at once. I am not now offering criticism of the Government’s policy of defence, I am concerned only with the choice of this particular site, for a rocket range; with the effect on the aborigines of the violation of one of their last great strongholds, for whatever purpose. As an expert, I claim to be able to assess the position, and in the light of past experience, to predict with reasonable certainty, the effect of a given line of policy. But the acceptance or rejection of this, and the responsibility for the consequences, rests with the Government. It is unfortunate that charges of communism, of irresponsibility towards the defence of Australia, should have been dragged like a red herring across the trail, to confuse what is a separate and clear-cut issue. I am not a Communist, and as an Australian who knows the aborigines and who has served his country, I claim the right to be heard.

IHAVE predicted that violation of the Reserve will spell disaster—not from the missiles themselves, but from those contacts which 150 years of past experience have proved beyond any doubt to be absolutely fatal to the aborigines. This, like the statements of the Government’s spokesmen, is wide and general. Are there no specific examples of the effect of white impact on the aborigines and their culture in recent years? There certainly are.

If one cites the fate of the Tasmanians, which stands as one of the blackest pages in history, or even the story of the Victorian aborigines, reduced, in not much over 100 years, to a population which can be numbered almost on the fingers of one hand, we are told “that is ancient history”. But history is repeating itself; we show no signs of having profited by the lessons of the past.

To come nearer home. In 1903, the Rev. N. Hey stated that there were then 400 members of three tribes speaking the Ngerrikudi language, still living. When I visited the area in 1933 — just thirty years later — there were less than twenty. And in all that time the natives had been under what was then regarded as the most enlightened and humane form of “control” and “protection”. True, that is 30 years ago. But what of Groote Eylandt, which supported a splendid population, untouched by the “rot” of white civilisation, until about 1923? Today the population of Groote is broken down, the island largely depopulated, the culture debased. The final coup was delivered by the

action of the Commonwealth in establishing a flying boat base there about 1936, and this dismal story could be multiplied indefinitely.

IHAVE omitted one vital point, which has been stressed recently by a writer on the subject of the rocket range, with peculiar irony. These are merely the “aboriginal peoples from whom this continent was originally taken by conquest”.

THE repeated assurances of the Government and its spokesmen that the aborigines of Central Australia will suffer no Injury from the rocket range about to be established in their territory, or from the contacts within the Reserve, carry no conviction, and leave a feeling of profound disquiet in the minds of thinking Australians.

They are couched in too general terms—and they bear a striking resemblance to similar assurances given in the past in matters concerning the aborigines. But a change has taken place in the attitude of Australians towards the black-fellow, and the man in the street is as sceptical about the assurances regarding the rocket range as he was about the success of each of the bewildering succession of ‘new deals for the aborigines’ which have never come to pass.

IT has been claimed in defence of its decision that the Government has sought the advice of experts. But wait. Who are these experts? Are they impartial men chosen solely for their experience of the aborigines and their special problems? They are, in many cases, men already committed to, or responsible for, the present state of affairs in native administration, and therefore committed to support of the Government.

The experts co-opted by the Commonwealth are Mr. F. H. Moy, recently appointed Director of Native Affairs, a man who has presumably been entrusted with implementing the Government’s policy; Mr. A. O. Neville, representing the West Australian Government (the administration of native affairs in Western Australia has come under withering fire more than once in recent years); Mr. W. R. Penhall (Secretary of the Aborigines Protection Board of South Australia— from which Dr. Charles Duguid has just resigned in protest); and Professor A. P. Elkin, leading exponent of the Government’s policy.

Professor Elkin has said: “I can state categorically that many of the fears expressed on behalf of the Australian aborigines as the result of the rocket range proposal are groundless.” From what first hand field experience does Professor Elkin speak? He cannot plead ignorance of the past history of our contacts with the aborigines. What is there about this latest decision of the Government which places it so far from all

previous experiments as to enable Professor Elkin to give his “categorical denial” of all fears for their effect upon the aborigines?

And now I wish to make clear my own position in this matter, for I feel that it has been grossly misrepresented’.

It has been stated in the press that in addition to the co-opted members of the Committee on Guided Projectiles, Dr. Charles Duguid and I were also consulted, by order of the Minister for Defence. It has also been said that the Committee considered that neither Dr. Duguid nor I had advanced any reason precluding satisfactory arrangements for the safety and welfare of the aborigines. This Is a denial of the facts.

I was Invited with Dr. Duguid, to attend part only of one meeting of the Committee. I received no warning and the Invitation was conveyed to me by telephone only ‘the night before the meeting. I had no adequate knowledge of the facts which were before the Committee and when I went into the room it was clear that my presence and that of Dr. Duguid was a mere formality in deference to the instructions of the Minister. But both Dr. Duguid and I expressed our views in the most definite terms.

I stated that, from my own experience, and I quoted concrete examples, there was no reason to believe that the safeguards proposed by the Committee could be any more effective than in the past; that I believed the measures proposed by the Government would not be adequate and that I considered the use of the Reserve must mean the doom of the aborigines in the territory concerned. These facts were not palatable to the Committee and I consider that. the official statement made subsequently is a serious misrepresentation of the facts and of my own warning as to the inevitable outcome of the policy now proposed by the Government. I wish to place the facts on record. Posterity will prove the truth.

Published by Rocket Range Protest Committee, C/- Room 18, 4th Floor,
Centreway, Collins Street, Melbourne, C.I.

Reprint by Challenge Press, 64 Sydney Road, Coburg, N.13 — 1957.