

The Question of Aboriginality

October 3, 2011

From Letters to the Editor, Quadrant Magazine, October 2011:

SIR:

I was very disappointed to read your article “The Trial of Andrew Bolt (II): Real Aborigines versus Phoneys” (December 2010).

In the article Windschuttle questions the Aboriginality of Sally Morgan, Jill Milroy, Helen Milroy and their mother Gladys Milroy, quoting heavily from a paper by Huggins (1993) which asserted that genetic inheritance was not sufficient to make someone an Aborigine.

Having worked with the Milroys for nearly twenty years I can testify to their outstanding commitment and performance in improving education and other outcomes for disadvantaged Aboriginal people.

It is very inappropriate for you to write, “Today Morgan and her family are prominent members of the Aboriginal establishment and make six-figure earnings from their identity”. Sally Morgan, Jill Milroy and Helen Milroy were all appointed through advertisement and the same procedures as for all staff at the University of Western Australia. All three have made major contributions to the West Australian community.

Alan Robson, Vice-Chancellor, University of Western Australia, Nedlands, WA.

Keith Windschuttle responds:

Dear Professor Robson,

Thank you for your letter, which I will publish in the October edition of Quadrant. I’m afraid you overlook the main point of my article, which was not concerned with the help the three Milroy sisters have given Aboriginal people. I wrote about the decision of a group of Aboriginal activists to sue journalist Andrew Bolt in the Federal Court for racial vilification because he questioned the authenticity of their Aboriginal identity. My article provided a number of examples, from the 1960s to the present, to demonstrate that many Aboriginal people have long questioned the identity of others claiming to be Aborigines. My intention was to show that, while Aboriginal people can question others’ identity with impunity, when non-Aboriginal Andrew Bolt did the same he found himself in court. In short, there is a racial double standard on this issue.

As you note, one of my examples was an article by Aboriginal academic and political figure Jackie Huggins challenging the identity of one of the three Milroy sisters, Sally Morgan. In a review of Morgan’s book *My Place*, Huggins complained that the author did not grow up in an Aboriginal community: “I could not identify anything which told me Morgan was an Aboriginal person except the part about our common Aboriginal study grant.” Morgan’s claim, “we had an Aboriginal consciousness now”—made when, aged thirty, she and her mother discovered they were descended from Aborigines of Western Australia’s north-west—was dismissed by Huggins. Genetic inheritance alone did not make someone an Aborigine. “Solely swallowing the genetic cocktail mixture,” Huggins

wrote, “does not constitute ‘being’ an Aboriginal as so many Johnny-come-latelies would have whites believe.”

These comments were made not in some nondescript publication but in an academic journal—peer-reviewed no less—Australian Historical Studies, April 1993 edition. If you find this argument so disappointing, instead of reproaching Quadrant for reproducing it, you might have sent a letter to the editors of the journal who published the original, Professors Stuart Macintyre and Marian Aveling, plus a copy to Huggins herself at the University of Queensland where she is adjunct professor in the School of Social Work.

I accept your assurance that your institution followed all proper procedures when it appointed the three Milroy sisters to academic positions in Aboriginal affairs. My article never made any suggestion to the contrary. Still, I was surprised when Sally Morgan was made Professor and Director of your university’s Centre for Indigenous History and the Arts, since her only formal academic qualification is a BA pass degree with a major in psychology. Even though her book *My Place* seems to me more a family memoir than a work of academic history, it must have been the major reason she won the position, since she had published little other historical research when she gained her appointment.

If her book was that important, there is an issue I would like to take up with you. As you may be aware, *My Place* has been subject to serious criticism, which Sally has so far failed to answer. In an interview on the Nine Network in 2004, Judith Drake-Brockman described the book as “absolute fabricated tripe” that made her “disgusted and sick”. She called it “a fiction of our relationship and a caricature of history”.

Judith is a member of one of the two families at the centre of the book. Sally claims her half-caste grandmother Daisy Corunna was the illegitimate daughter of Howden Drake-Brockman, the white pastoralist who ran Corunna Downs, near Marble Bar. Judith, one of Howden’s legitimate children, denies this, and much else besides, in her own family memoir *Wongi Wongi*, published in 2001 by Hesperian Press.

Judith provides considerable evidence, including family photographs, to disprove Sally’s claim that Daisy was one of the “stolen generations”. Rather than being stolen, Daisy was employed as the Drake-Brockman children’s nanny, and she spent her teenage years in this position—the summer months in Perth and the rest of each year on Corunna Downs, where Daisy’s own mother still lived. Moreover, Judith argues Daisy’s father was not Howden but Maltese Sam, the station cook, originally from the Torres Strait islands. Indeed, Judith challenges Sally’s entire characterisation of Daisy. In real life, Daisy did not speak the way Sally records in *My Place*, and never had the “poor fella black” attitudes the book gives her. Judith also dismisses *My Place*’s account of the childhood of Sally’s mother Gladys, whom she knew from birth. In her 2004 interview with journalist Helen Dalley, Judith called upon Sally and Gladys to take DNA tests to establish whether they really were descended from Howden. They declined to co-operate. “We respect the right of others to hold different views to ourselves,” Sally said, “but my family does not wish to participate in the program.”

In my own book *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History, Volume Three: The Stolen Generations* (2009), I discuss all these issues at length and argue Sally's response is unsatisfactory. Her book on the two families' relationship has given her an influential position in a public institution. State education authorities around Australia require thousands of students to read *My Place* every year—the book has sold more than 600,000 copies, mainly to school students. Hence the issue is far more than a private dispute between families.

If Sally took a DNA test and published the results she would immediately resolve one of the most contentious issues, whether she and her two sisters really are the great granddaughters of Howden Drake-Brockman—not to mention her book's insinuation that Howden might also have been the father of their mother Gladys, and thus their grandfather too.

In the interests of transparency of scholarship, Sally should also place the original tape recordings of her interviews with Daisy and other family members in a public library or archive where other researchers can double-check the accuracy of her transcripts. As I'm sure you are aware, it is normal practice across a range of academic disciplines to make source data available in such a way to other scholars.

I urge you to ask Sally to take both courses of action. Her academic position and the influence of her book on school children throughout Australia give her a public responsibility to defend her work. I hope you will agree that a response in these terms would meet the academic and scholarly standards your university was founded to uphold.

Yours sincerely,
Keith Windschuttle, Editor