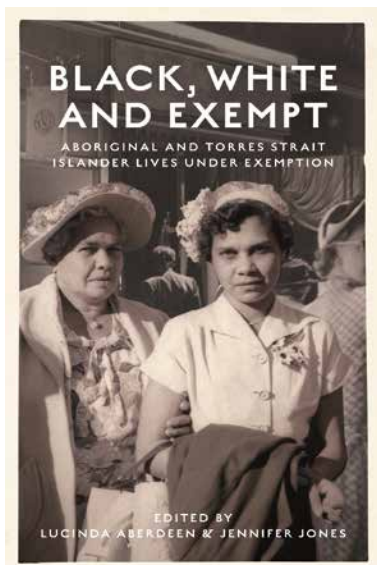


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Black, White and Exempt: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Lives under Exemption

By **Lucinda Aberdeem and Jennifer Jones, eds.**

Aboriginal Studies Press

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Reviewed by Nigel Page, Anglican Church Grammar School

This book is a somewhat niche contribution to the history of Australian Indigenous people. It examines the Australian government's policy of exemption from the Aborigines Act 1905, which allowed Indigenous people to be exempt from certain aspects of the law, and the impact of this policy on Indigenous lives.

The book is based on a collection of essays by various scholars

and researchers, each exploring different aspects of exemption and its consequences. The essays cover a range of topics, including the legal framework of exemption, the lived experiences of exemption, and the impact of exemption on Indigenous families and communities. The book also includes a detailed analysis of the historical context in which exemption was introduced, providing readers with a comprehensive understanding of the policy's origins and evolution in different states.

One of the strengths of this book is its ability to give voice to descendants' recollections, but this is also part of the problem. The first disappointment is perhaps a problem of evidence. Many of the accounts focus on anecdotal and individual instances that are usually told by descendants. Indeed, this book is the product of a meeting where much effort was given to 'observance of Indigenous protocols under elder direction with segregated yarning circles held for Indigenous and non-Indigenous community members, academics, and students, in accordance with respectful design protocols' (p.7). This raises an interesting qualification for the degree to which such accounts might be considered authoritative when research is mediated through, and possibly subject to censorship due to, 'the need for family, permissions and exemption research' (p.8).

The best chapters go beyond potted family histories and instead provide some broader historical and legislative understanding of the events. Chapter 2—'The Poisoned Chalice: Exemption Policies in 20th Century Australia and the Writing of History' by Katherine Ellinghaus—is perhaps the strongest chapter and the one most suited for any History teacher interested in some of the policies associated with the

regulation of aboriginal movement. This chapter does, however, have a relative paucity of detail about crucial aspects of the various legislations. For instance, across the different chapters there is an interestingly opaque account of the factors that motivated colonial legislatures to introduce restrictions on Aboriginal movement through the establishment of reserves and the creation of protection boards responsible for the management of those reserves and the Aboriginal people on them. One of the recurring points in the book is how the various boards of protection were keen to minimise cost, with a keenness to see Aborigines move into mainstream society, albeit as evidence of their capacity for assimilation.

As a History teacher, I found this book to be a useful resource for understanding a little more about the variety of protection legislations and their personal impacts. It provides a detailed account of the policies and practices that have shaped Indigenous lives over the past century. The book also provides a range of perspectives on exemption, from legal analysis to personal accounts, enabling students to develop a deeper understanding of the policy's impact on Indigenous families and communities.

I was, however, left wondering if the legacies of being placed on a mission or reserve had a measurable impact on intergenerational educational, health or economic trajectory. Were the harms different to the outcomes experienced by other Indigenous people with different family histories? We aren't told.

Overall, this book is a useful additional resource for anyone interested in the history of Indigenous peoples in Australia, although more for personal than professional purposes.