

## **'And the meek': some introductory remarks**

I have prepared three texts for today. The first consists of various stray remarks, dicta and apocrypha and other things besides. It serves as a general prologue to the rest, a set of conditions, if you like. I can only announce its existence. If and when I put these texts on my website they will appear there. The second text takes loosely the form of what Browning called a 'dramatic monologue'. This is perhaps more an 'undramatic' monologue.

I admire Browning's flat ordinary diction, the intense psychological insight, the fact that it is in a profound sense self-presenting. If it gives itself it gives itself away *internally*. It is revelatory in that sense.

This main text ("Enter the Missionary") has been ruthlessly slashed for the occasion, less hunter/gathering than 'slash and burn'. I do not like this violation. The text itself takes as its central character Bill Mackenzie, the famous missionary who occupied and directed and gave shape to Aurukun for 42 years, leaving as I remember in 1967, just two years before I myself went there. His presence continued to hover. His 'encounters' with McConnel and Thomson were at one time well known. There was a view that these *contretemps* were responsible for a general embargo on anthropology and anthropologists thereafter. More apocrypha, possibly, for Mackenzie himself invited a film crew from what was later to become Film Australia to record dancing at Aurukun in 1962, and himself packed up the carvings made on that occasion that are held in various museums and national collections. Also, it was under his auspices that Ken Hale did fieldwork on Wik Mungkan and the Wik Way languages in the 1960s – principally Linngithiy, with Sam Kerindun ('the most garrulous blackfella in Australia', according to Hale). Maybe linguists are considered less treacherous than anthropologists.

The text itself is based, at least in part, around two subsidiary texts: the Beatitudes, as from Matthew - the meek who will inherit the earth; the merciful; the pure of heart – 'who will see God'; and the peacemakers – who will be named 'children of God'. In my account Mackenzie stands against Meekness. In this he is a true Wik *mensch*. *Ngangk thayan*, which I'll translate as 'strong guts' precisely to keep in mind its gutsiness, stands against *ngangk waya*, 'weak spirit'. The latter need not be lacking will; to the contrary, it may be excessively wilful – but inadequately social; self-isolating and therefore unreliable. Yes, like the Wik I consider meekness the death of the world – pointing to the inadequacy of such frameworks as human rights, social justice, and the whole administrative order, what I call the world of the self-evident good and of administered being. This is domestication, not being; curtailment not ... (You may need to help me; I need a term.) Being is a tough affair. Blackfellas may complain about 'sit-down money' but the culture of 'meekness' has people sitting down to die; hence my supplementary text intended to provide the basis of an art installation: PLEASE DISPOSE OF YOURSELF NEATLY BENEATH THE STONE (SLAB) PROVIDED.

The fantasy of full employment avoids the difficulty of contemplating a world beyond work. This is one of the challenges posed to and by Aboriginal societies.

The culture that insists on work and full employment is a culture of resentment. Yet in fact full engagement in the life of the mission was one of the guarantees Mackenzie was able to offer.

The third text provides a postscript: a set of reflexions after the fact. It addresses among other things the issue of anthropology as a self-exempting practice.

I have asked Slawek Janicki to perform with me – not as a challenge to anthropological practice or to the academy but as a concession to my own current practice. It has its reasons even if I am not entirely sure what they are. Slawek and I are supported by the Visual Arts Board of the Australia Council and we acknowledge that support here.

There is in fact a fourth text – a visual text. It's rough and ready and reflects my own rudimentary skills. Treat it as a silent accompaniment. The compilation is based on two paintings, '12 Minutes of Infamy' produced in 1997, and an untitled work dealing with the future of Aurukun, from around 2000 or maybe earlier. After Mackenzie left the mission acquired an aeroplane. Mostly it operated between the mission and Peret outstation, south of the river: *poerith* or *wath-nhiin*, water rat. The plane was called the Bill Mac, after Mackenzie. It crashed on final descent into the new north-south runway, ploughing into the mangroves at *ko'in*. The pilot, Keith Seiler, was killed and the name placed under embargo. So Mackenzie himself became the nameless one: *thaapity*. The scene of a crashing or at least ominous plane nose-diving into the village precedes September 11 by some considerable time. Read it as the flight of the bureaucrat, if you wish.

I came across other drawings: a set devoted to the missionaries, produced in 2006 or thereabouts. There's Sister Alison who ran the Clinic, and Joe Bartholomew who ran the sawmill. Yes, when I went there first Aurukun was still building its own houses.

Other things were photographed in recent days around Sydney. A world of hardness and the imprint denied; a world of shadow presences, fleeting, anonymous, empty.

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Youtube link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tl9rM-VSQ4>