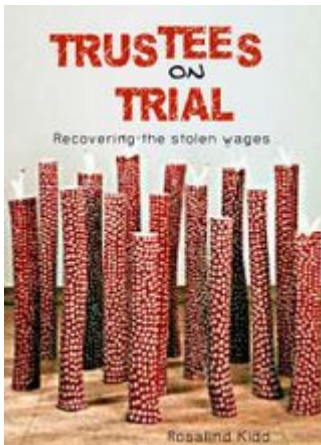


Trustees on Trial: Recovering the Stolen Wages by Roslyn Kidd. Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2006, pp. xii + 212, AUD \$34.95 Paperback, ISBN: 0855755466.



In this disturbing book Roslyn Kidd provides both a legal analysis and a comprehensive history of the Queensland Aborigines' 'stolen wages' scandal up to the present time.

At the end of the nineteenth century the colonial legislature in Queensland recognised that Aborigines had suffered and were still suffering appalling treatment at the hands of white settlers. As a result, a system of protection was established whereby Queensland's Aborigines became wards of the state. Queensland's colonial legislators undoubtedly intended the new system to be a means of improving the lives of the Aborigines. However, Kidd shows that their good intentions resulted in the 'stolen wages' scandal.

The goal of the state government during much of the period 1897 to 1972 was to minimise expenditure on the Aboriginal population. All able-bodied Aborigines were required to work and the government confiscated the greater part of their wages. A significant proportion was placed in a compulsory savings scheme. Kidd shows that the Aborigines were denied access to their savings, which had effectively been stolen by the government. Furthermore, during the Great Depression of the 1930s part of the large accumulated sum of money confiscated from Aboriginal wages was used to fund government expenditure that should have been met from general revenue.

In 1957 Cornelius O'Leary, director of the Queensland Department of Native Affairs, observed 'We try to look on these people [i.e. Aborigines] as human beings'. But Kidd shows that during the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s the food rations for the Aborigines under the protection of O'Leary's department were so inadequate that many children and babies died of starvation. Government officials were aware of this, but they reduced expenditure on food rations for the government and missionary administered Aboriginal reserves still further during this period. Some might argue that this amounts to a form of genocide. However, Kidd leaves readers to reach their own conclusions.

Kidd's book is based on her doctoral research and testimony in the legal proceedings whereby the Queensland Aborigines have attempted to recover their stolen wages. There is a very useful chapter explaining why, under Australian law, the government is not liable if it fails to exercise due diligence as trustee. Another chapter compares the legal situation of indigenous people in Canada and the United States with their Australian counterparts. While in Canada and the United States case law means the government has a fiduciary duty, the reality is sometimes different. For example, the administration of George W. Bush has chosen to ignore such court rulings.

In 2002 the Queensland premier, Peter Beattie, made a compensation offer to those who had had their wages stolen by the government. Kidd believes the offer was woefully inadequate because it represents only a small fraction of the stolen wages. However, Queensland is the former stronghold of Pauline Hanson's One Nation party, which is anti-Aborigine. This is probably why in his foreword to Kidd's book Geoffrey Robertson QC argues that Beattie deserves at least some recognition for acknowledging a responsibility which other Australian states have declined even to consider.

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