

The First Australians

I first saw Cabbage Tree Island as a low, black line on the Richmond River, a solitary light shining across the water from the landing stage. As the launch came over and bumped against the jetty, Rus McCrohon jumped ashore to greet me. He is the teacher in the small school at the aboriginal station on the island, and the prime mover in the Numbahging Co-operatives which, slowly and with many birth pains, was being founded on the island.

As the launch chugged away across the river, Mr. McCrohon introduced me to the man at the tiller, Bob Anderson, tall and silver-haired, as one of the members of the board of the Co-operative which was meeting that evening, and to David Kapeen, its treasurer, who was fiddling with the motor in the dark. When both of them spoke to me in colloquial English with strong Australian accents I was a little surprised. These were the first Aborigines I had spoken to, and although I knew that the majority of the two hundred living on the station were detribalised and of mixed origin, as are the majority in the eastern part of Australia, I had somehow expected to meet men who were more obviously different.

It was only as the launch slipped into the pool of light that I saw that Bob Anderson was dark skinned and that David Kapeen was fairer than most Italians, a range of colour that next day revealed itself in the children in the school room.

All the families on the island have been there for a long time. I was soon to learn that they, in common with most aboriginal settlements, feel little sense of identity with other groups in stations and reserves in their area of New South Wales. They tend to marry among themselves, and to close their ranks against an outside family. They do not have the ties of loyalty to their people which, for instance, act as a bond between Negroes in the United States.

This is an attitude which reflects their dependence upon the station on which they live; they are insulated against outside influence by the paternalism of the authorities, and they find it difficult to stand on their own feet. Stations such as Cabbage Tree Island have a special and privileged place in the complicated network in which the State authorities and the Aborigines are enmeshed.

This article is taken from Jeanne MacKenzie's book, Australian Paradox, published by MacGibbon and Kee (London) at 30s. Jeanne MacKenzie spent two years in Australia collecting material for the book.

In the Co-operative Store on Cabbage Tree Island (left to right), Mr. H. J. Jeffrey, Manager of the Aborigines Welfare Board Station; Mr. A. Landa, Minister for Housing and Co-operative Societies; Mr. A. J. Mockler, of Registry of Co-operative Societies; Mr. Bob Bolt, Chairman of Numbahging Co-operative; Mr. Ian Robinson, M.L.A.; and Mr. R. McCrohon, Cabbage Tree Island school-teacher

