Fiona Foley, *Biting the Clouds: A Badtjala Perspective on the Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act, 1897*


In September 2021, Fraser Island was renamed K’gari in an ideological nod towards sovereignty and justice for the Badtjala people. It seems a perfect opportunity to examine one of the most significant academic works examining that region of the Fraser coast, K’gari and Badtjala mobs. Since my undergraduate studies in the late 1980s, I have developed what I would call a *relationship* with the *Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act* (1897–1939). Given the opportunity to reengage and undertake a new reading of this Act brought me a renewed sense of excitement.

I examine Foley’s *Biting the Clouds* with three constructions in mind. The first is telling how the Badtjala encountered opium and the construction of that part of this work. The second – more unfamiliar to my historian’s training – comprises the discussion and presentation of the author’s art practice in this space she has established with the Act, settler actions and violence and opium itself. The third is the overall conclusions I draw between these two constructions.

Foley centralises silence and misinformation as recurrent themes throughout this text. She says ‘correcting this flow of misinformation is a mammoth task, especially when the Badtjala voice has historically been inaudible or absent’ (2020: 17). Titling the book *Biting the Clouds* utilises what Foley describes as the euphemism for being stoned on opium.

In the first three chapters, Foley maps out the misinformation and consequence of the contact between the Badtjala and the English, examining many of the relevant texts that shape the telling of these first 100 years of interaction and calling them ‘Australian myth making’ (2020: 13). Starting by highlighting the early interactions between local Aboriginal people and the colonial population, Foley identifies the upper hand local people had in the earlier interactions with colonisers and the subsequent inability of the colonisers to move into the Maryborough region unchallenged. Eventually, however, the response from the colonisers – including the use of the Queensland Native Police Force – led to a level of decimation of the local Aboriginal populations that will never be able to be fully accounted for.

Foley identifies the first application of the *Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act* (1897–1939) was to set up the Bogimbah Creek mission on K’gari, where Aboriginal
people from across Queensland who were living with the effects of opium were sent. This meant a joining together of the Badtjala at Bogimbah Creek mission with other Aboriginal people. When the mission closed in 1904, many Badtjala returned to the mainland. In these chapters, Foley examines the creation of misinformation and wholesale undermining and devaluation of what Indigenous peoples knew of their land and the rationalism of violence against them. As with all parts of the colonies, Foley asserts that the goal was always to replace Aboriginal culture with a new culture and way of life.

In Chapters 4 through 6, we see Foley grapple with the lived reality of all the decisions made under the auspices of the Act. She includes an examination of the interplay with church and other authorities against the Badtjala and other Aboriginal people. Most interesting is the way Foley weaves through the book the second concept examined here of her long-standing interaction at conceptual and lived levels, and in so many other ways, with the Act and its inheritance.

Foley notes that her engagement with the academic form means engaging with a new structure, or perhaps language. It is crucial to the totality of this reading to hear her words:

> My research into race relations in Queensland has taken me into areas of historical silences, in return, that silence has attracted the silencing of my own work, intellect and voice. Aboriginal bodies speak to sovereignty. I am the embodiment of my country. I am an uncomfortable truth reminding you of your forefathers’ past deeds. (2020: 140)

Her choice of her own art practices to illustrate her arguments is moving and informative. They speak to her sense of being silenced by being ignored: her art not collected by galleries, not commissioned and not engaged with critically. Hence the act of ignoring her work and the ignoring of her is a further act of the colonisation of Badtjala across time. ‘Today I deal with a new frontier of axiological violence’ (2020: 104). What is striking, though, is the opportunity to bear witness to an excellence of artistry informed by deep engagement with the Act, country and critique across a multiplicity of mediums. It is moving as a non-artistically driven writer to go on this journey with Foley. We bear witness to the pain of her silencing, but glory in her artistry.

In conclusion, it is easy to get trapped as a historian in Foley’s academic journey and want to critique whether there is a full and academically rigorous analysis of the Act and of the place of opium in the lives of the Badtjala, but it is fairer to say that the author did not have a single goal for this piece of work. It honours the lives of the Wondunna Badtjala, and illuminates the questions of ontology, cosmology and other knowledges at play. In fact, identifying all the goals to be achieved by the author shows the veracity of her life work, knowledges and approaches. This work is a small representation of an enormous body of work. Perhaps, though, it might be better to ask whether this is a good read. The truth is that it is.

– Stephanie Gilbert

University of Queensland
stephanie.gilbert@uq.edu.au