school. Then, though the Americans have a great
capacity for mis-applying the English language,
Australians have an even greater capacity for borrow-
ning half-understood social terms from America and
they have started to talk of “integration” of our
aborigines. I would not myself bother much about
the labels that other people choose to use, except that
in this case I think that we may fall into error if we
make any analogy between the present condition
and future state of the Australian aborigines and those
of the American negro and if we see the antithesis in
Australia as one between “segregation” and “integra-
tion” in the current North American sense of these
terms.

“Assimilation” itself is an inexact label. Histori-
cally it means a rejection of the old idea of protection
and caring for the aborigines as a special class. As
recently as twenty years ago the prevailing idea in
Australia was that the aborigines were a special class
of benighted people, legally placed in a category
similar to that of mental defectives, who were doomed
by their nature to be always something less than fully
human, who were bound to die out, and who had to
be protected from exploitation or abuse and who, for
reasons of compassion, had to be cared for in special
places. They were not like us. They were under
protection. The new idea of assimilation was a
recognition that they were like us or could become like
us and that in fact they were moving more and more
towards our community and that, for a wide variety
of reasons related both to our own sense of what it
was right to do and of what it was advantageous to
do in a social sense, we should work to help them to
become like us and live like us, in the same community.
A policy of assimilation means that, if it is successful,
the person of aboriginal origin will be the same as
any other resident of Australia in the eyes of the law,
will go to the same schools, do the same jobs at the
same wages, live in the same sort of houses, lead the
same sort of life and join in the same recreations and
observances as any one else in the Australian com-
unity. Because of our basic Australian ideas he will
do this by his own will as the life he would naturally
lead.

In the long run I think myself that he will also be
biologically assimilated and become part of the general
infusion that makes up the Australian of the future.
This would be integration in the exact and ancient
meaning of the term—a making one. You will get
the meaning if you think of its true antonym, “dis-
integration”.

I detect, however, in the new fashion for speaking
of integration rather inexactely in Australia, an idea of
preserving something of the separate cultural identity
of the two races. I think there is a rather romantic
foundation for this—the same sort of thing which,
with all due respect to the tradespeople who benefit,
is expressed in the Moomba Festival in Melbourne, in
the vogue of Central Australian paintings and in the
sale of factory-made koala bears and boomerangs. I
would question, however, whether it is anything more
than a romantic notion.

We might ask ourselves, concerning the future of
the aborigines: Is it certain that they will lose their
aboriginal culture? Should deliberate efforts be made
to see that they do not lose it?

There is need for them to escape shame over their
racial origin but this does not necessarily mean that
they have to retain their distinctiveness as aborigines.

There is also a need for the transition to be slow
and need to take care that they do not lose one source
of vitality before they are sure of another, but this is
not necessarily the same as saying that the transition
can never be completed.

My own observation, recorded tentatively, is that
the loss of any valid and distinctive aboriginal culture
is certain in the course of time. The ancient pride
can remain—and in fact may grow. Those people of
Scottish ancestry who delight in strange capers at
Hallowe’en, and those people of Irish origin who
whenever they do something fine exclaim “It must
be my Irish blood” are examples of the sort of cultural
pride I have in mind. But how real are the bagpipes
and the kilts and the poetry of Burns as a cultural
force in Australia? The Scot and the Irish and the
English are “assimilated”, not “integrated” into
Australian life.

I look to the future when a person whose great
grandfather was an Australian aboriginal will be as
proud of the fact as a Scot is rightly proud of his
barbaric ancestry.

My final word is that while we accept assimilation
as the goal we do not think of assimilation as suppression,
nor do we ignore the reality that the transition should
be slow—the slower it can be the better—and should
be made so as to leave behind it no sense of shame in
ancestry. These are great dreams. How can we
realise them?

—Reprinted with kind permission of “Smoke
Signals”, Staff Magazine of the Welfare Branch of the
Northern Territory Administration.