

**The Chief Protector Returns: Textual Representations of
A.O. Neville**

By

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Abstract:

“The Chief Protector Returns: Textual Representations of A.O. Neville,”

Master of Arts.

This thesis examines the different ways in which representations of A.O. Neville—Chief Protector of Aborigines / Commissioner of Native Affairs in Western Australia from 1915 to 1940—operate in a select group of texts. I argue that Neville is a highly charged synecdochic figure who stands in, discursively, for all white, bureaucratic administrators, in order to distil changing anxieties about Australia and its past. I examine key texts from Neville’s own writing to a range of more recent, fictional texts. I utilise a postcolonial approach in my analysis of the figure of Neville, through a reading of his continuing incarnations in Australian literature and culture. This project seeks to do with A.O. Neville what Kay Schaffer’s *In the Wake of First Contact: The Eliza Fraser Stories* did with Eliza Fraser.

The thesis begins with a reading of Neville’s *Australia’s Coloured Minority: Its Place in the Community* (1947), alongside archival records from Neville’s administration and contemporary newspaper articles, in order to analyse his self-representation. This section also sets up a framework for reading unsettling, disturbing discourse, encountered

through Neville's employment of eugenicist theories in his administration.

The second section shifts its focus to the fictional representation of Neville in Kim Scott's *Benang: From the Heart* (1999). Scott's novel, which won the Miles Franklin Award for 2000, is complex, rich and multi-layered, and is centred around Neville and his policies. I undertake a close reading of Scott's novel, focusing on its strategic deployment of archival material from Neville's administration. I argue that *Benang* is an example of a productive reading of Neville and *Australia's Coloured Minority* that destabilises eugenicist discourse by articulating both its power and fragility.

The thesis culminates with a critical examination of the most recent, highly publicised fictional incarnation of Neville: the three versions of *Rabbit-Proof Fence*. Doris Pilkington's original *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* (1996) precedes *Rabbit-Proof Fence: The Screenplay* by Christine Olsen (2002), upon which the feature film *Rabbit-Proof Fence* (2002), directed by Phillip Noyce, is based. The film won the Australian Film Institute Award for Best Picture in 2002, and generated a heated public debate and for this reason the film is my primary analytical focus. Debates about the film moved beyond cinematic circles into the public domain, and I analyse these political manifestations of the debate alongside the reviews, as both highlight complex, contemporary

anxieties as they coalesce and clash around the representation of the figure of Neville.

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“When all the other clerks have gone
he’s flicking through his set of cards.
Every fleck of black is in them”

Geoff Page “The Afternoon of AO Neville” (38).