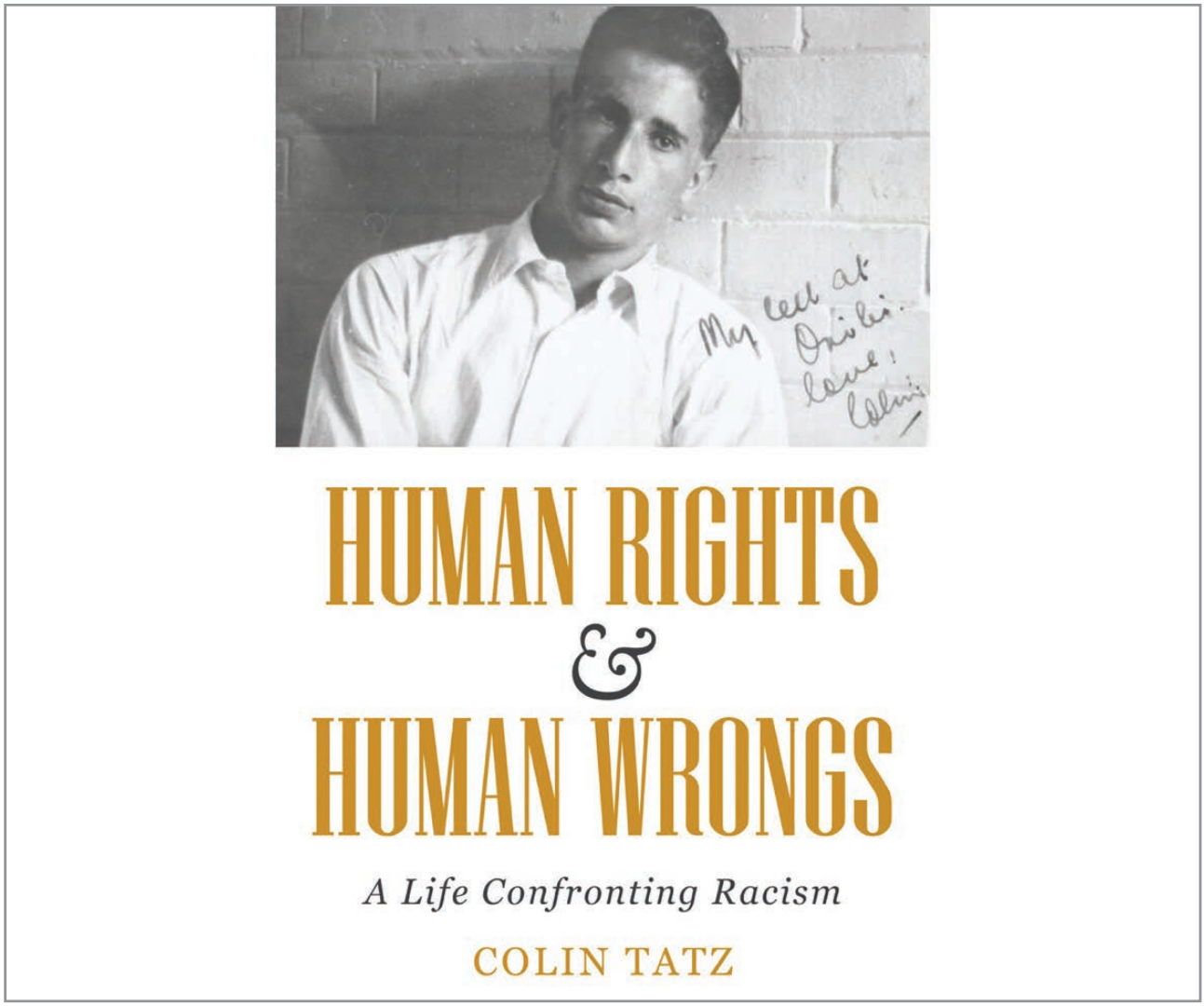

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Book Review by Robert Orr

Colin Tatz is currently Visiting Professor in Politics and International Relations at the Australian National University ('ANU'). He has played a major role in researching, writing, and teaching in relation to Aboriginal Australians, and racism more generally. This fascinating autobiography traces his life journey in the pursuit of answers to some of the hardest questions concerning law and racism.

I met Colin Tatz when I was a very part-time Masters student at the ANU, desperately seeking a convenient course to undertake. I found one with the principal title of 'International Criminal Law'. It was only as I began the usually arduous task of reading the set materials that I noted the secondary title, 'Genocide and the Law'. But even this did not reveal the full breadth of the course. Taught by Colin, the readings and lectures began with the definition of genocide in the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (1948), but from there sought to investigate and understand those horrific and central events of the 20th century, which now take that name, in Turkey, Germany and Europe, Cambodia, Rwanda, the former Yugoslavia and elsewhere. Colin's course focussed on the role of law in causing and preventing acts of genocide, but searched much more broadly into other disciplines to explain them. As he notes in the book, perhaps the hardest question is, 'how is genocide humanly possible'?[1] Importantly, Colin added the treatment of Australia's Indigenous peoples to the discussion. In the course, Colin clearly demonstrated his immense understanding of and insight into the subject, approaching this task, as he says early in the book, with passion, rather than simply with knowledge.[2] He was a very gifted teacher.

This course prompted me to read much more widely in this area, including, when I noticed it, Colin's autobiography. This provided a much deeper understanding of his life than was glimpsed at in

his lectures. Colin was born and grew up in South Africa, and his earliest influences there proved foundational. He was Jewish, which he describes as the foremost factor in the inner dynamic of his life;[3] his family had come from Lithuania. The book gently demonstrates the centrality of this tradition to his life, for example in his family's celebration of Jewish festivals in very Anglo-Celtic 1970s Armidale, where he taught at the University of New England. Towards the end of this book is a beautiful reflection on being Jewish.

As something of an outsider, he became aware of the failure of any in South Africa to say please or thank you to their 'servants'; then of the separate racial facilities; then of the need for others to carry a 'pass'; and then of the deep roots of injustice in that society. In what he describes as a tough childhood, he was inquisitive, intense and brave, and found pleasure in reading and sport. These early years taught him that 'promoting human dignity counts above all other considerations'.[4]

The book says much about Colin's adult life, his marriage and children, his key decision to leave South Africa and settle in Australia, and his travels to various places here and overseas. But the primary focus and most interesting strand follows his evolving research, writing and teaching interests. For me, he could have said even more about this work, but he no doubt hopes that readers will follow this up in his many publications. His serious academic work began in South Africa with his Master's thesis on the relationship in South Africa between the 'non-White franchise' and land available to Black South Africans. Colin found from the 18th century onwards a consistent ideology of racial superiority as the basis of South African society, with a major effect on the political and land rights of Black South Africans. This examination of the causes and effects of racism, in particular within the law, became a life-long focus.

The book records how on moving to Australia this interest evolved into a PhD thesis at ANU from 1960-64 on Aboriginal policies and their administration in the Northern Territory. As he notes, academic interest in Aboriginal people was at that time almost wholly from anthropologists. He approached the place of Aboriginal people as a political scientist and sociologist, looking at public policies, their administration, through extensive recourse to government records, and their effect on Aboriginal communities, as assessed by travelling to and investigating the conditions there. He describes himself towards the end of the book as an 'anthropologist of the White tribes of policy makers and bureaucrats' involved in Aboriginal affairs).[5]

He researched and taught in this area at Monash University, where he helped establish and was head of what is now the Monash Indigenous Centre, and then the University of New England and Macquarie University, delving into ground-breaking areas. This included the effect of mining on Aboriginal people, in particular the uranium mine in Kakadu. He also researched and wrote about sport generally, and in particular sport and Aboriginal Australians. A central theme was that, contrary to popular belief, sport is political; in particular it reflects inequality and racism in society; but it also provides a survival mechanism for minorities, plays a significant role in the lives of Aboriginal Australians, and can perhaps provide part of a solution to communities in peril.[6] He also conducted significant research on suicide, writing *Aboriginal Suicide is Different: A Portrait of Life and Self-Destruction*, first published in 2001.

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The further development of Colin's academic interests came in part from a visit to Yad Vashem in Jerusalem, where he attended seminars with the pre-eminent Holocaust scholar Yehuda Bauer. Colin records as 'membrane-breaking' Bauer's teaching that the Holocaust was not some meta-historical event, but a human event, perpetrated by humans upon humans in civilised Europe, with genocide an age-old phenomenon.[7] It prompted Colin to research, write, including *With Intent to Destroy: Reflecting on Genocide* (2003), and teach extensively in this area, and establish the Australian Institute for Holocaust and Genocide Studies. There were many streams to this work, but an important one was whether the treatment of Aboriginal Australians, the killings, creation of living conditions, and removals, were calculated to destroy or seriously harm them.[8] In this area, as others, Colin champions the use of legal proceedings or inquiries; whilst they might not result in convictions or compensation, they have, he argues, great value in providing tested evidence of historical events.[9]

As he describes his academic work, one can feel Colin grappling with issues, but straining against easy or accepted answers. He strongly questions ahistorical or universalist approaches; he more gently queries group enthusiasm for fashionable trends, such as, of relevance to this journal, the use of the term 'Indigenous'.[10] When he reaches views they are strongly held and expressed. Giving voice to forceful views on contested issues of current public policy is an important role for academics and activists. But it is sometimes difficult for governments and public servants to adopt all elements of these views, since they need to acknowledge and respond to a range of perspectives, and seek an appropriate compromise. A key impact of Colin's work has however been his identification of

important but neglected areas, and his enormous effort in setting out into these, developing tools to explore them and teaching and encouraging others to follow, especially, as he notes, Aboriginal academics in Australia.

It is the importance of providing a memory, helping people to understand how they got where they are and where they are heading, including in areas ignored by traditional research, which marks Colin's work.[11] I found his course deeply moving; I found this book a fascinating account of a brilliant academic's work in the fields of 20th century racism.

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1 Colin Tatz, *Human Rights and Human Wrongs* (Monash University Press, 2015) 357.
2 Ibid, 78.
3 Ibid, 5.
4 Ibid, 347.
5 Ibid, 356-7.
6 Ibid, 298.
7 Ibid, 256-8.
8 Ibid, 305.
9 Ibid, 280.
10 Ibid, 324-5.
11 Ibid, 356-9.

Weres 1 (detail)
Gail Mabo
Acrylic on canvas
1400mm x 1220mm