Between a Rock and a Hard Place:
A Case Study in Reconciliation

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As Martin Goodman boarded the plane at Kingsford Smith airport for Alice Springs, he was acutely aware that the outcome of tomorrow’s meeting would have profound implications for race relations in Australia. Certainly, it would be the most challenging in his five years as national director of Frontier Services, the Uniting Church agency which absorbed the renowned Australian Inland Mission (AIM) with its long and proud record of service in the remote areas of the Australian outback. The controversy, seemingly of two conflicting spiritualities, black versus white, Aboriginal versus Christian, was close to spinning out of control. Feelings were running high both in the newspapers and on the airways. Racist attitudes were surfacing. Loyal Uniting Church people expressed confusion and anger. He would need to be sensitive to both the claims of the traditional owners and the deep and widely-held respect for the memory of the Rev. Dr John Flynn, humanitarian, outback hero and founder of the AIM and the Royal Flying Doctor Service (RFDS).

Once in the air Goodman took out his notes and refreshed his memory of the events leading up to the dispute. It began in 1953 shortly after John Flynn had died, and Flynn’s successor, the Rev. Fred McKay, erected a monument over Flynn’s ashes near Alice Springs using one of the boulders taken from the sacred Aboriginal site and tourist attraction near Tennant Creek, the Devil’s Marbles.

Goodman mused on the outstanding achievement of the legendary figure John Flynn who had founded the organisation he now headed. Flynn’s vision for the AIM which he served for 39 years was simply breathtaking. His motto was ‘for Christ and the Continent’. He believed that by throwing a mantle of safety over three million square kilometres of outback Australia he would not only assist the existing settlers but also encourage the development
of white settlement in which women and children could safely live in the harsh conditions of the Australian outback. The establishment of the mantle of safety was made possible by his visionary use of planes for medical work, the development of the pedal radio, and a complete network of bush hospitals, nursing and spiritual care.

From Goodman's theological perspective there was an ironic twist to Flynn's work. Flynn, himself, was not the same passionate advocate for Aborigines as he was for whites in the outback. Moreover, his work had effectively helped to consolidate the invasion of Aboriginal lands. Nonetheless, there was no denying that Flynn was a great patriot, his work was inspirational, and he had tapped into a sense of national pride during the depression and between the two world wars. Goodman was also aware that Frontier Services was heavily dependent on the goodwill that had been generated by Flynn over the past nine decades. He conceded that even when the legendary accretions were taken away, Flynn was one of the 'greats' of Australian history. Flynn had been honoured for his community work by the Crown, recognised as a nation-builder by both Federal and State governments, appointed to his highest leadership by the Church, and acclaimed by the people of the outback as their champion. It was no surprise, thought Goodman, that the name of John Flynn was a household word in Australia. Even during his lifetime, Flynn achieved legendary status, especially after the documentary film, 'The Inlander' was screened as a supporting film in practically all Australian cinemas, and Ion Idriess' immensely popular book, *Flynn of the Inland*, was first published in 1932.1 Idriess wrote in the Author's Note: 'I have written *Flynn of the Inland* in order that the people of Australia may learn something of the work which has been and is being done for the isolated and suffering humanity by the Australian Inland Mission, its Padres and Doctors, its sisters and voluntary workers—and by one Padre in particular... This book is my humble tribute of admiration for John Flynn and his fellow workers.' When a subsequent biographer, Scott McPheat, placed Flynn under the searching scrutiny of a more dispassionate doctoral study, he, too, concluded: 'There is no need to romanticise him [Flynn], or to idealise him...the real man is enough. With his strengths and his weaknesses, he was a great man.'

Goodman remembered his parents speaking of Flynn's funeral when he was a boy. There were memorial services conducted all

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1 Idriess' book was so popular that it went through four reprints within the following three months.
over Australia. Every newspaper in the country carried his eulogy. Literally thousands of letters and telegrams poured in to Mrs Flynn and the AIM. Shops were closed in Alice Springs when a service of committal was conducted on 23 May 1951 near Chinaman Creek under Mount Gillen, outside Alice Springs. Almost the whole population of Alice Springs gathered at the site. Cattlemen and their families made long journeys by night to be there. A truck load of miners in working clothes came from Hatches Creek. Old Timers from the bush brought out their white shirts and donned them. A group of Arrernte Aborigines drove in from Hermannsburg Mission. Church dignitaries flew in from capital cities. Patrol padres turned up in their best suits, AIM Nursing Sisters in their white uniforms, children in school and college clothes, and the Northern Territory Police formed a guard of honour.

Padre Kingsley (Skipper) Partridge, decked out in unaccustomed Geneva gown and hood, conducted the internment ceremony. Partridge had been Flynn’s patrol padre in that area for many years. He stood on a rustic platform, eyes blinking against the bright light, and spoke with controlled emotion. ‘There was a man sent from God, whose name was John’, he said quietly. Partridge did not set out to preach a sermon that day, but to paint an unforgettable robust picture of Flynn the man. He spoke simply about Flynn’s gentle character, the man who gave unstinted love to the people of the outback, and who, in return, received their unstinted love. ‘Here he worked with pride and joy in a task well done. So here he lies where he longed to be. He is not dead; his work abides; his memory is for ever eloquent. For across the lonely places of the land he planted kindness, and from the hearts of those who call those places home, he gathered love.’

The many memorials to Flynn around the country were also testimony to the veneration with which he was regarded, both by the Church and the Australian community. It is common knowledge that there are more memorials to Flynn than to any other single Australian. At Moliagul, in Victoria opposite the house in which Flynn was born, is a simple, tall, white column. Alongside it is a plinth of local sandstone, including chips of pink and white marble and a piece of red sandstone from Alice Springs. The inscription on the plaque concludes with Partridge’s words, ‘Across the lonely places of the land he planted kindness and gathered love’.

At the junction of the Barkly and Stuart highways, not far from Tennant Creek, is another column, rising to a height of 8 metres. This was not built as a memorial to Flynn, for he was 67 at the time of its construction. It was erected by the Flying Doctor Service and
was officially known as the John Flynn Commemorative Cairn. It took a lot of persuading to get Flynn to approve of it at all. In the end he agreed only if it would also commemorate the work of those who had helped bring his pedal radio and aerial medical dreams to fulfilment. Its inscription reads, 'His vision encompassed the continent. He established the Australian Inland Mission and founded the Flying Doctor Service. He brought to lonely places a spiritual ministry and spread a mantle of safety over them by medicine, aviation and radio.'

At Cloncurry in Queensland where the world's first flying doctor service came into being, there is a memorial, near the airport, in the form of a stone obelisk, and the plaque reads, 'He brought the Mantle of Safety to the wilderness and solitary places...'. In the heart of Alice Springs, there is the largest of all memorials to Flynn, a national shrine, in the form of the John Flynn Memorial Uniting Church in Todd Street. The builder, James Richards, described his work as the most worthy job of his life. The opening took place on the fifth anniversary of Flynn's death, 5 May, 1956, when the biggest crowd (including the Prime Minister, Robert Menzies) Central Australia had ever seen gathered to dedicate it. Many Australians contributed to the building; cattlemen and wolfram miners gave the entrance pool with its symbolic artesian bore water; a pastoralist donated stringy bark timber for the pews; and others gave symbolic gifts too numerous to recount. The people of the Australia felt that it was their tribute to the man who had always dreamed of a 'cathedral' in the centre of Australia.

Three other impressive memorials to Flynn include the John Flynn College at James Cook University in Townsville, the issue of a jubilee postage stamp in 1962, honouring Flynn and his work, and his image on the $20 note. Flynn's memory was greatly revered, so it came as no surprise to Goodman when he read a recent poll conducted by the Age listing Flynn among the top five most influential Australian humanitarians of the twentieth century, along with such notables as eye-surgeon Fred Hollows, war hero and doctor, Edward 'Weary' Dunlop, heart surgeon, Victor Chang, and Catholic saint, Mary MacKillop.

The site where Flynn's ashes were initially interred was only a provisional one, awaiting a more permanent resting place. The small cairn of ashes was later placed in a fire-proof safe in the Public Works Department office in Alice Springs until the grave-proper was constructed on a hillock at the foot of Mt Gillen. The Northern Territory Director of Lands surveyed this area, and it was defined as a Historical Reserve, to be known in perpetuity as 'John Flynn's
Grave’. The Reserve is registered officially as containing 0.4376 hectares of land, five kilometres west of Alice Springs, beside the road which leads westwards, with the spur of Mt Gillen in the background.

It was left to Rev. Fred McKay to plan the grave. The inspiration to use a Devil’s Marble as the grave stone is credited to David Smith, the District Engineer in Alice Springs who said, ‘John Flynn’s grave should be a bushman’s grave. There should be nothing like it anywhere else. Why can’t we get one of the Devil’s Marbles?’ The idea caught on and gained momentum. It was discussed with Jean Flynn, Flynn’s widow, who motivated by the biblical story of the stone placed across Christ’s tomb, enthusiastically replied, ‘Jack would certainly like that’, knowing how well Flynn would have appreciated both the honour and the irony.

Fred McKay flew to Darwin. He talked with Frank Wise, the Commonwealth Government’s Administrator in the Northern Territory. He too was enthusiastic, declaring that he believed if any man deserved a Devil’s Marble for his gravestone, it was John Flynn. In his later retirement in Perth, Wise diarised the interview he had with Fred McKay on 7 March 1952. ‘As the Queen’s representative’, he wrote, ‘I gave my approval to the use of a boulder from the Devil’s Marbles as a memorial to Flynn’.

An Australian Inland Mission team—Fred McKay, Skipper Partridge and Jack Reynolds—packed their swags and headed north some 400km up the Stuart Highway towards the Devil’s Marbles. There they carefully selected a boulder and took it to Alice Springs where it remained for nine months beside Chinaman Creek, while final arrangements were made for a permanent grave site on the hillock above. On 12 August, 1953, Flynn’s grave was consecrated and the eight tonne granite Devil’s Marble was mounted on a quartzite plinth containing Flynn’s ashes. There it has rested for almost fifty years as a fitting memorial to one of Australia’s visionaries.

Goodman sympathised with the many Australians who regarded Flynn’s grave as a sacred place. Yes, it was a tourist attraction like the Three Sisters in the Blue Mountains and the Twelve Apostles on Victoria’s Shipwreck Coast; but it was more than that. Lutheran pastor, F. W. Albrecht of Hermannsburg Aboriginal Mission, on 7 May 1956 addressed a large group of people on pilgrimage to Flynn’s grave with the words, ‘This great stone, this Devil’s Marble, is a symbol which has special meaning for us all in this country.’ Since then over 80,000 people come to visit Flynn’s grave every year. For many Flynn’s grave is a sacred site, a
place of pilgrimage, not unlike Anzac Cove at Gallipoli where Australians seek to connect with the youthful spirit of sacrifice and service.

Goodman was aware that when Fred McKay and his colleagues removed the Devil’s Marble in the early 1950s most Australians were abysmally ignorant of Aboriginal culture and mythology. No one would have considered the possibility that the rock might have spiritual significance or that someone might have ‘owned’ the Devil’s Marbles area, with its hundreds of rocks scattered on both sides of the Stuart Highway. There were no rock carvings or paintings. There was no protest against the rock’s removal. There was no sense that the rock had been ‘stolen’. There was no suggestion of any impropriety whatsoever. So Goodman understood the surprise the AIM must have felt in 1975 when the traditional owners of Karlu Karlu (the Aboriginal name for the Devil’s Marbles), the Kaytetye and Warumungu peoples, demanded that the rock on Flynn’s grave be returned to its original site.

Goodman’s predecessor, the Rev. Stuart McIntyre, had informed him that he had made a special visit to Tennant Creek to investigate the situation at the time. There he listened with some astonishment as he was told by Aboriginal representatives that a policeman had been killed when he crashed his vehicle into what was thought to be the rock on Flynn’s grave. It was following that crash that the rock was said to have been taken to Alice Springs as forensic evidence. McIntyre disclaimed that story on the basis of photographic records that showed that the Marble on Flynn’s grave had been balancing on another, well above ground level, and could not have been involved in the crash. The Aborigines apparently accepted this explanation and McIntyre thought that was the end of the matter. They parted amicably, and no further discussion arose from this incident.

McIntyre’s investigation seemed to Goodman little more than trouble-shooting. McIntyre had not really probed the underlying distress caused by the removal of the marble. Nor had he made any attempt to understand the sacredness of the rocks and the ancestral beliefs associated with them. A little research would have shown that Karlu Karlu as with prominent features in the landscape was rich in Dreaming sites and ancestral activity. The Kaytetye and Warumungu believe in a Primordial Being, the black Sky Hero named Atnatu, who lived before the time of creation. It was Atnatu who gave them the land and all it has to offer. Atnatu also made them custodians of the land and they take their custodianship
of the land very seriously. It was clear to Goodman that their
geoegraphy was iconic, a spiritual map. A traditional custodian of
Karlu Karlu, Leslie Foster Jampijimpa, reinforced this view when he
told Goodman on an earlier visit to the Centre that the removal of
the marble was like taking a child away from its parents, that the
stolen marble was an integral part of their sacred site and their
spirituality. Another old man, Tungulla, tapped a tune with his
walking stick and said, ‘that’s the song of the rock and when it
comes back I’ll sing it for you.’

Little was heard about the rock on Flynn’s grave until March
1980 when an incident in Tennant Creek appeared to strengthen
the Kaytetye and Warumungu peoples’ resolve. The Tennant
Creek Tourist Promotion Association, the local Town Council, and
Peko Mines joined together to create a recreational park in the main
street of the town. The Tourist Promotion Association wanted to
honour what Peko had done for the community and for the
Northern Territory by erecting a monument in the park. Someone
came up with the idea that a rock from an area 18km north of the
town, known to the Aborigines as Kunjarra, but to the townsfolk
as the Devil’s Pebbles (as distinct from the Marbles which were
70km south) be used for the monument. The idea seemed
appropriate and gained enthusiastic support from the parties
involved. So a Peko crane and low loader were used to move the
stone to the park. It didn’t occur to anyone to consult the
Aboriginal custodians of Kunjarra, nor even to ask them to join in
the venture. As in the case of the Marble on Flynn’s grave, the
people involved were apparently quite unaware that the rock had
any significance to the Aborigines. The Pebble remained in place for
six months, but in September of that year, expressions of disquiet
about its removal began to emerge. Letters were written to the
local paper criticising the move. These were followed by strong
words of support for the monument. Correspondence snowballed
and outspoken convictions, both for and against, showed a tense
division of opinion in the community. It became increasingly ugly,
and the stone itself was defaced with crude graffiti. Subsequently,
meetings of the interested parties, including the Aboriginal
custodians and the Sacred Sites Authority were held, and, early in
1981, a year after its positioning in the park, it was decided to
return the Pebble to Kunjarra. A ‘Concerned Citizens Group’ was
strongly opposed to the decision and indeed foiled the first attempt
to remove the stone. But the die was cast, and the stone was
returned in July 1981.
Buoyed by their win the Kaytetye and Warumungu formed their own local Council and with the assistance of Jonathan Rodd, a lawyer with the Central Land Council, turned their attention to the rock on Flynn's grave, but negotiations were slow. There was the death of one of the senior men, Jampijimpa's older brother, which slowed things down. Then there were distractions, such as plans to route the Alice Springs to Darwin railway and the Stuart Highway bypass through the middle of the Marbles.

Then in the early nineties the Kaytetye and Warumungu peoples made a direct request for the return of the Marble on Flynn's grave. The claim was deemed to be legitimate by the Aboriginal Areas Protection Authority on the grounds of the rock being of spiritual significance to the traditional owners.

As soon as it was rumoured that the Aborigines were claiming the rock on Flynn's grave, there was an immediate outcry around Australia. Tony Charlton, a national councillor of the Royal Flying Doctor Service, said that he was 'outraged'. Mr 'John Flynn', he asserted, had 'served the people of the Outback—black and white—in a way no other Australian has done...To desecrate his grave would be offensive to all who have regard to the man's magnificent contribution to Australia.' Fred McKay was deeply distressed by the claim made on the rock. Flynn's grave had been blessed and dedicated in a regular Christian ceremony. He pleaded for everyone to get together at the grave site, recognise that the Royal Flying Doctor Service had saved hundreds of Aboriginal people and acknowledge that Flynn's grave site is the rightful place for the rock to remain. Fred Baird, John Flynn's nephew, was deeply concerned about the proposal to reclaim the rock. He had personally fabricated the stainless steel containers for Flynn's ashes now sealed under the Devil's Marble. He said that the claim for the return of the rock 'was a bit like biting the hand that fed them.' Doug Kay of Clayton, Victoria, wrote in the Herald Sun, 'After all the good that the Rev. John Flynn did for the people of the outback, I think his grave should be regarded as a "sacred site" and not allowed to be desecrated by two Aboriginal tribes. Let him rest in peace.' J. E. Cross's letter in the Adelaide Advertiser was typical of many that Goodman received on his desk: 'I was appalled to read that the Aboriginal people had demanded that the rock marking the Reverend John Flynn's grave should be removed and taken back to the sacred place known as the devil's marbles...I would suspect that there would be literally thousands of rocks at the devil's marbles and surely, in the spirit of reconciliation, the indigenous people could donate just one rock to the memory of a
man who has saved the lives of thousands of people of all castes and creeds...Not only would this gesture be appreciated by all but the act of removing the rock from the grave is, to my culture, an act of desecration.

The view that the rock should have been left clearly resonated with many Australians. In a poll conducted by the Melbourne Herald Sun newspaper eighty-four percent of respondents wanted the Federal Government to break its silence on the issue and intervene to stop the removal of the rock. Goodman became increasingly concerned that genuine distress about the rock might be fanned into ugly racism, especially after Victorian RSL president, Bruce Ruxton, issued a press release condemning the proposed removal of the boulder marking Flynn's grave, saying with unconscious irony, 'This grave is a sacred site and the Aborigines have no right to interfere with the grave...Imagine the furore if the stone was taken from an Aboriginal grave...No other Australian living or dead had done more for the Aboriginal people and the tribe should be ashamed of themselves for wanting this grave disturbed.'

In Alice Springs feelings were running high. The controversy was fanned by a front-page story in the Centralian Advocate with the heading 'Flynn's Grave Rock A Bungle', alleging that the rock on Flynn's grave was never one of the Devil's Marbles and had no significance at all for local indigenous people. The source of the story was an old pastoralist, Jack Chambers, who considered the claim for the rock's return as 'downright insolent' and 'greatly disrespectful to the memory of John Flynn, who was one of our most honourable pioneers'.

The presentation of the story pandered to people like Bruce Cotterill, a tour bus operator with the Alice Wanderers in Alice Springs who was reported on ABC Radio as saying he had lost respect for the Aborigines over the issue, and wouldn't be taking people there [to the grave site] any more. His emotional voice blurted, 'I think to remove this is a sacrilege against the European way of life. I piss on their sacred sites.'

Not everyone was opposed to the removal of the rock. Wenten Rabuntja, a senior Arrernte expressed the ambivalent feelings felt by most Aboriginal people in and around Alice Springs. On the one hand he remembered his father and grandfather speaking with great affection and respect for Flynn, whom they called 'The Old Man'. He was also aware of the good and long-standing relationships Aboriginal people in Alice Springs had with the Uniting Church and the Royal Flying Doctor Service. For these
reasons there were some that wanted the stone to remain undisturbed. But the majority feeling was that the rock came from another 'country'. The Devil’s Marble was alien in their land and they wanted it removed. 'The people', he said, 'would talk about it around the campfires and they felt a little shame because the rock didn’t belong here.' Brian Burton’s letter to the Adelaide Advertiser was typical of those in the white community who were happy for the rock’s return, ‘The removal of the rock from John Flynn’s grave’, he stated, ‘in no way undermines his contribution to Australians, particularly those living in remote areas. In fact, this proposed gesture would be a significant act of reconciliation for the Australian community…To understand the importance of sacred sites, I challenge people to imagine an Aboriginal person climbing up on to the roof of their church… I see no difference between climbing a church and taking a symbolic rock…Respecting our differences and celebrating our combined cultures is one aim of reconciliation. I commend the returning of the rock to the sacred site at the Devil’s Marbles and see this as an important example of reconciliation.’ In a pastoral letter, Gale Hall, General Secretary of the Northern Synod of the Uniting Church, wrote in a similar vein: ‘the challenge for the church is to hear the cry of the Kaytetye people—and then show it is willing to respond. It is an opportunity to correct an inadvertent wrong—the taking of the Karlu Karlu stone.’

The next morning Goodman arrived at the government offices of the Aboriginal Areas Protection Authority (AAPA) in Alice Springs for the meeting to decide on the future of the rock. Gathered around the table were people of diverse interests and points of view: Leslie Foster Jampijimpa and other Kaytetye and Warumungu custodians of Karlu Karlu, Wenten Rabuntja representing the Arrernte people from around Alice Springs, Tony Charlton of the Royal Flying Doctor Service, Jonathan Rodd, lawyer for the Central Land Council, Fred Baird representing the family of John and Jean Flynn, Fred McKay and MARTIN Goodman, himself, representing Frontier Services and the Uniting Church. Dr Michael Pickering, AAPA Regional Manager, was convenor of the committee. Pickering’s degree was in prehistory and anthropology from the Australian National University. He had spent time in the field as a consultant to the Northern Land Council and three years at AAPA. He was knowledgeable, patient and respectful of all the parties. Sensitive to the divisive nature of the matter before them, Pickering wisely laid down four ground-rules for the committee’s deliberations: there was to be no disrespect for John Flynn; no one was being accused of any wrongdoing; there
was to be no blame apportioned; the meeting was to focus on an agreed resolution.

Pickering began the meeting by quietly asking each person present to present their point of view in the hope that negotiation and goodwill would lead to an agreed solution. Goodman was asked to speak first...

Teaching Note

I. Objectives

A. to explore an issue in Aboriginal reconciliation.
B. to gain experience in resolving conflict between two religious world views.
C. to foster reconciliation in Australia.

II. Opening (20 minutes)

A. Have the group:
   i. identify and describe the characters.
   ii. describe the situation facing Goodman.

B. Identify the important issues. These might include:
   i. Aboriginal reconciliation.
   ii. The religious and cultural significance of John Flynn.
   iii. Aboriginal spirituality.
   iv. Racism in Australia.

III. Role play (40 minutes)

A. The role play needs at least twelve participants. If there are more than twelve, small groups can represent the Royal Flying Doctor Service and the Warumungu and Kaytetye custodians and the Arrente elders.

A. Appoint each person in the group to a role. It is usually helpful to ask person in the group to write their character’s name on a piece of paper or card and place it on the desk in front of them.

C. The person who plays Pickering will need some skill in chairing meetings and needs to allow each person in the group an opportunity to speak. He will also be aware that English will be the second or third language for the Aboriginal people present.

D. Arrange the table and chairs to resemble a formal meeting. It is important that all members in the group have reasonable eye contact.

E. Make certain that the person playing Jonathan Rodd, the lawyer for the Aboriginal people, sits beside them. He may need to consult with them.

IV. Debriefing (10 minutes).

V. Closing (5 minutes)
A. List significant learnings.