

The Good Country: The Djadja Wurrung, the Settlers and the Protectors

by Bain Attwood

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Bain Attwood's latest book marks something of a return to his very earliest foundational work on local Indigenous histories in colonial Victoria. Widely known for his broader discussions on generalist Indigenous topics including land and civil rights movements, the Stolen Generations 'narrative', frontier conflict, and Aboriginal historiography and questions of power, in this work Attwood has turned his focus on one particular region and set of historical actors: the Djadja Wurrung people of the Kulin in central Victoria, the settlers who laid claim to their country, and the colonial officials who acted as mediators, the 'Protectors'. *The Good Country* is in many ways a return, also, to a more traditional narrative form of colonial history than we have become accustomed to reading in past years, and in this respect reflects Attwood's ongoing wrestle with the question of postmodernism and narrative theory in Indigenous history.

Structurally, the book moves through a series of six roughly chronologically organised chapters tracing the Djadja Wurrung's experiences of invasion and dispossession. The history opens with the originating encounter between Europeans and Aborigines in the Port Phillip district in the mid-1830s. Painfully little is known empirically of this initial interaction at a local level, beyond fragmentary traditions recorded by the likes of Protector Edward Parker, but Attwood does what he can to offer a Djadja Wurrung perspective here. The two maps in this chapter, representing present-day understandings of the traditional Djadja Wurrung domain, help locate the reader in this history. In the following chapter, on the conflict that rapidly follows the appearance of European colonists, a third map provides the details of the many, many pastoral runs that were established on Djadja Wurrung territory (I would have

liked to have seen some kind of dating on their appearance, but in their proliferation perhaps that is not possible: Attwood's directions to the reader for his sources for follow-up will be useful for researchers). This chapter, which talks of the 'killing times', provides a descriptive chronicle of violent conflicts and massacres in Djadja Wurrung country in a brief but intense period from 1838 to 1842.

Chapter 3 then moves into the period immediately following this onslaught, and discusses the nature of a frontier characterised by 'relatively harmonious relations', as Attwood puts it, between colonists and the local people. This situation he ascribes to three factors: the Djadja Wurrung's decision to form an alliance with pastoralists; the presence of Edward Parker's Protectorate; and the shocking impact of introduced disease. In the following chapter, Attwood works through the new colonial policy of Protectorates that emerged from the late 1830s, moving the focus increasingly closer to the establishment of Parker's station protectorate at Larrnebarrumul in 1841. Chapter 5, 'Refuge', gives us a history of the Protectorate through the 1840s until its abolition in 1849. The sixth and final chapter, 'Decline', traverses the experience of the Djadja Wurrung through the gold rushes of the 1850s to the closing of the now dilapidated Larrnebarrumul station in 1864 and the removal of the Djadja Wurrung to Coranderrk station, where Attwood is able to trace the activities of a number of individuals who would play a role in the events of this station in coming years. Here, though, the narrative comes to an end, with an epilogue chapter providing an update on the contemporary (2013) agreement between the Victorian Government and the Dja Dja Wurrung Clans Aboriginal Corporation, recognising the Djadja Wurrung as the traditional owners of part of the land in central Victoria, and settling four native title claims.

In a practical sense, *The Good Country* is an orthodox, even old-fashioned, local Aboriginal history of colonial dispossession. As explained in his acknowledgements, the genesis of the book was in research undertaken for the then Dja Dja Wurrung Aboriginal Association by Attwood with two other historians (Nicholas Clark and Marie Fels) in the 1990s, the results of which were published in a slim volume by Attwood in 1999,¹ and its roots as such are clearly visible. However, not only has the historical evidence been deepened and the original account extensively rewritten, but Attwood frames his revised history in larger ways that give it more of the historiographic weight we have come to expect from this historian.

In the first place (and this will be of interest to readers of this journal), Attwood presents the study as a case study for the larger project of Indigenous history for which the journal *Aboriginal History* is the flagship. He delineates the dimensions or preoccupations of this project thus: expanding the time frame of Aboriginal history back beyond 1788; emphasising and centralising Indigenous people in this

1 Attwood 1999.

history, which had tended to be heavily Eurocentric; presenting or representing Aboriginal perspectives on this history; a commitment to scholarly objectivity, to recover a range of historical experiences and avoid passing judgement; an expansion of conceptual frameworks beyond history proper, to reveal the role of Aboriginal culture in shaping post-contact society; and, finally, and for Attwood's study 'most importantly', a determination to focus on local specificities and variations of the Indigenous experience rather than subsuming such differences within a generic national historiography. Within this framing, Attwood challenges existing historians who have written on the subject of colonial settler–Indigenous relations in recent times with the critique that the archival research is less fulsome than it could or should be, and that 'a great deal of this work is [therefore] overly programmatic in nature, adds little if anything to historical understanding, and renders the past a much less complex and messier place than it really was' (p. xiii). This does strike me as a little unfairly dismissive of a field shaped by theoretical positionings and concerns that Attwood himself has played a key role in promulgating. Putting this aside, however, in *The Good Country*, Attwood has indeed provided a lucid and succinct account of a local colonial history, based upon rigorous archival methodology, a study that shows quite clearly the 'messiness' and complexity of Indigenous–settler relations in the colonial period. Perhaps most appealing for me in this work is the way that Attwood has implicitly rendered locality, place and country indivisible and inextricable from Indigenous history: the title is apt, for this is really a study of a history of country *and* people, a 'good country' indeed.

Reference

Attwood, Bain 1999, *My Country: A History of the Djadja Wurrung 1837–1864*, Monash Publications in History, Clayton, Victoria.

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