

## *From the Edge: Australia's Lost Histories*

by Mark McKenna

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## *'Moment of Truth: History and Australia's Future'*

by Mark McKenna

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National reconciliation remains a work in progress. Under the federal Turnbull Government, it faltered and stalled. Turnbull's cavalier and graceless rejection of the Uluru Statement from the Heart has been widely condemned. Mark McKenna's *Quarterly Essay*, 'Moment of Truth: History and Australia's Future', ruminates on the implications of the Prime Minister's ham-fisted response, and charts a way to get the process back on track. In particular, he pursues the statement's call for a national process of historical truth-telling.

This is an issue close to McKenna's own heart. With his award-winning *Looking for Blackfellas' Point: An Australian History of Place* in 2002, he made the case that Australian citizenship must be built on knowledge of the violent dispossession of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and recognition of their status as Indigenous Australians with particular claims on the state. A decade and a half later, he returns to these issues and arguments in two new publications. In the *Quarterly Essay*, he describes an incident during the 40th commemorations of *Aboriginal History* journal, which were held at ANU in October 2017, when Frances Peters-Little asked the majority-white audience 'why you whitefellas are interested in blackfella history'. McKenna was the next speaker up, having graciously stepped into the breach at the 11th hour when Henry Reynolds could not join the meeting.

He recounts in his *Quarterly Essay* that he responded to the question by saying that he ‘found it impossible to live in this country as an informed citizen without understanding Aboriginal history and culture’. But he felt unsatisfied with that response, and went away from the day knowing that there was more to think about in order to approximate an adequate answer. In some ways, the long-form essay he penned over the summer constitutes a fuller response to Peters-Little’s question, but it also builds on the journeys he had been taking once more into place, politics and history.

*From the Edge: Australia’s Lost History* is accessible, narrative history tinged with travelogue. In this work, McKenna presents four long chapters, each of which focuses on a different region in Australia. Spanning the south-east, north-west, north and north-east of the continent, McKenna excavates and presents what he calls ‘lost histories’. Through these places and their deep and buried pasts, he proposes a series of alternative foundational histories that speak to articulations of national identity different from the white settler-colonial one that continues to dominate public discourse and commemoration. These alternative foundational stories are all anchored deeply in the ancient and enduring histories of Indigenous people; and they draw attention to a multiplicity of relations and interactions that developed between Indigenous people and others. Teasing out the complexities and ambiguities, as much as ambivalences, of cross-cultural interactions to provide richer accounts of Australia’s past, McKenna is working in the same vein – and on some of the same places, people and events – as a number of emerging, younger historians. As a book pitched at a general readership, it is not heavy with citation, but the inspiration of this new scholarship is quietly evident.

The *Quarterly Essay* is, true to the demands of the genre, more polemical, but with a touch of poetry. Although it begins bleakly with the impasse that has emerged in the wake of the Uluru Statement, it is on the whole a hopeful essay. McKenna draws strength and optimism from the depth and quality of Indigenous leadership; the checks and balances of parliamentary democracy; and the power of historical truth and symbolic gestures to heal broken polities and build reconciled communities. McKenna argues strongly that a reconciled national community is within reach, and that it is in the hands of the federal parliament and its leaders to achieve it. As with *From the Edge*, McKenna anchors much of his analysis in place. The ones he mobilises for his arguments in this essay are not on the edge but in the centre: Uluru and Canberra. McKenna begins by describing what he considers is a hole in the heart of the parliamentary triangle – the notable absence of a monument to Indigenous Australia – and ends with a proposal to fill the empty space with a museum devoted to Indigenous culture and history and a national monument that acknowledges the violence of colonial dispossession.

The essay also visits Botany Bay, and its fraught history as a national foundational site. He tells a story of a street sign he stumbled across at Kurnell (the site of Captain Cook's landing in 1770), which declared the unprepossessing suburb the 'birthplace of modern Australia'. By means of a forensic study of the weather-beaten sign (aided, he notes, by an army of volunteer researchers at a local library), McKenna reveals a series of subtle emendations to the slogan that responded to the shifting politics of national foundations. Woven into this part of the essay is a brief discussion of what McKenna describes as 'the stolen bark shield' that Dharawal people 'had used to defend themselves against Cook's musket fire'. The shield does not receive the same degree of scrutiny as the street sign; its status, provenance and the claims made about it are presented in the text as though uncontested. Only readers of footnotes will know that knowledge about the shield is in flux; that assumptions about its association with Cook challenged. Also mentioned and celebrated is the 'discovery' of another shield, also apparently associated with Cook, in a museum in Berlin. Despite what the headlines said, the claim of discovery, like most claims of discovery, have been overstated, and the Cook connection contested. So, there is an unfortunate unevenness in where McKenna's critical gaze rests. Nevertheless, the broader arguments about identity politics, foundational myths and national futures, which he makes through Kurnell, does remind us of what is at issue in current debates about commemorating Cook. Perhaps more importantly, it does a service in preparing us for what to expect in the public culture and discourse in the next couple of years as the 250th anniversary of Cook and the *Endeavour* in 2020 looms.

McKenna is a powerful advocate for the reconciliation agenda, and for the place of historical truth-telling as essential to the process. However, reading these two publications together made me wonder whether he is not overly hopeful about what history, symbolism and politics can achieve, or, alternatively, whether he underplays the depth of historical denial and silence upon which Australian social life has been built and continues to be built. Undoing *that* edifice might well prove to be far more challenging than building a monument that properly recognises Indigenous people, their history, culture and life in the heart of the nation.

## Reference

McKenna, Mark 2002, *Looking for Blackfellas' Point: An Australian History of Place*, UNSW Press, Sydney.

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