

Conflict, Adaptation, Transformation: Richard Broome and the Practice of Aboriginal History

edited by Ben Silverstein

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Review by Liz Conor
La Trobe University

The year I tutored in Richard Broome's subject 'Australian Aboriginal History' at La Trobe University was 2009. By then it had been overseen by Richard for 32 years and stood as the first such unit to be taught in an Australian university. As 'one of the giants' of our field, as Lynette Russell describes Richard in her foreword (p. v), he was unassuming and encouraging to all. As a true educator and generous mentor Richard is impeccably collegial.

Ben Silverstein's edited collection on Richard's contribution and impact to the field admirably covers his originary and close attention to Aboriginal agency, from his influential descriptor of them as 'voyagers' to his rethinking around paternalism along with 'radical hope' (p. 5). The articles range across south-eastern frontier violence, boxing tents, family memoir, assimilation and resistance in education, all correcting the erasures of Aboriginal history. The collection reflects on Richard's cross-cultural engagement in the 'suturing together' of 'two worlds with a place for all' (p. 15).

In keeping with Richard's advances, the collection foregrounds Aboriginal voice with articles by John Maynard, Julie Andrews and Maxine Briggs. Worimi scholar Maynard tells the incendiary tale of world heavyweight champion Jack Johnson's visit to these shores. An inspiration to Aboriginal boxing champions, themselves 'beacons of pride' (p. 64) to Maynard's community, Johnson 'unsettled white Australia' (p. 68) with his irrepressible talents in literature, political rhetoric, not to mention ring invincibility and his rather antagonising affluence. He finds that boxing confirms Richard's argument, that Aboriginal people were 'agents and manipulators of that power and abuse' (p. 64).

In a moving memoir of her great-grandmother, Wurundjeri and Yorta Yorta scholar Julie Andrews details her community's 'fierce loyalty' (p. 96) to this pioneer of 'resistance literature' (p. 97). Indeed, Theresa Clements penned the first Indigenous autobiography (c. 1954).¹ A Yorta Yorta woman, Clements's knowledge of kinship connections, teaching of Yorta Yorta songs, midwifery, her strategic combination of Christianity with culture and general resilience has left an ineradicable legacy for Andrews who lovingly studied her great-grandmother's autobiography as a 'family heirloom' (p. 119). She writes of her disappointment on discovering this deeply personal historical document was 'public property'. Both Clements's memoir and Andrews's article are resistance to the 'void' of Aboriginal writing that Andrews corrects in Australian history.

In an article that is compulsory reading for white historians Yorta Yorta and Taungwurrung librarian Maxine Briggs describes her work at the State Library of Victoria as 'custodial' (p. 160). Briggs explains how the colonial archive can, through an Indigenous research paradigm, challenge the entrenched assumptions of terra nullius still at large in Australian history. Like Andrews, she describes the importance of the 'continuum' of 'cultural heritage' (p. 165) that, she reminds us, reaches back into pre-invasion past since it is 'only a generation away' (p. 162). Briggs's chapter intervenes in the policy and culture of assimilation and its inherent 'epistemicide' (killing of knowledge systems) (p. 164). Education into white ways of living, she argues, was her people's 'only option for survival'. It is therefore critical that Aboriginal ownership of information is respected.

Lyndall Ryan sifts through the revisions over the decades in Richard's findings of frontier casualties and the staggering 80 per cent drop in population between 1834 and 1851. She notes his emphasis on 'cultural tenacity' (p. 29), but is puzzled by what she sees as an 'oversight' (p. 37) in fully coming 'to terms with the brutal reality of frontier violence' (pp. 29, 36). Ryan applauds Richard's mainstreaming of frontier violence in showing that it was the 'only full-scale conflict' ever fought on Australian soil (p. 27).

Silverstein and McLisky examine Richard's reappraisal of the notion of paternalism as negotiated between missionaries and Aboriginal people as a 'two way dynamic' (p. 38) in comparison with Noel Pearson's response to the 'new paternalism' and his claim that 'paternalist structures are a crucial part of enabling future Aboriginal agency' (p. 41). They note the deliberate misreading by the Conservative government of Pearson's reforms wherein 'community involvement in welfare regulation was essential. For the Howard Government by contrast, policy rested on the idea that community control was the problem' (p. 55). Silverstein and McLisky describe this cooption as part of the 'debris of paternalism' (p. 62).

1 Clements, *From Old Maloga*.

The genesis for Tiffany Shellam's work on King George Sound in Western Australia was a lecture Richard gave when she was his undergraduate student. From her research into this unusually accommodating, even amicable, frontier relationship between the Mineng and garrisoned soldiers, she crafts the important observation that Indigenous mobility is grounded in place. She notes Aboriginal 'travellers had geographic knowledge far beyond their own domains or estates'. Their maps are thus 'place-statements' (p. 87). Shellam writes of being urged by Richard to look for Aboriginal domain.

In contrast, Jennifer Jones describes the 'alien environment' of secondary education. In case studies of scholarships offered to Aboriginal students, she examines the 'meritocratic assimilation' of kids and how it conflicted with their families' strivings to 'maintain cultural fidelity' (pp. 128, 139). In the recent context of exemption certificates, child removal and discrimination, families were understandably reluctant to entrust their children to any such white schemes.

In Richard's chapter on the Victorian Aborigines Advancement League, he deploys Jonathan Lear's notion of 'radical hope' in the context of cultural devastation. Ever attentive to all expressions of agency, he finds parallels between Crow chief Plenty Coups and Wurundjeri *ngurangaeta* (clan head) Billibellary and, later, his nephew, Barak. These men demanded land on traditional country to farm, forging 'a new way of staying Aboriginal and close to the land of the Woiwurrung' (p. 151). Richard shows how this resistance paved the way for the activism of the Aborigines Progressive Association and its remarkable staging of the 'Day of Mourning' in 1938.

Silverstein applauds Richard's emphasis 'on recuperating Aboriginal agency as a response to colonial dominance' and this collection admirably assembles the achievements of Aboriginal modernity in the deployment of memoir, family and local history as interventions in the terra nullius of the colonial archive that Briggs exposes (p. 3).

Not long before his tragic death, historian Patrick Wolfe described Richard to me as 'one of the originals' and as 'going where no one had gone, and before anyone else'. This collection documents the wide reach and enduring influence of Richard's extraordinary intervention into the whitewash of colonial history, about a people whose dignity and continuity were never lost on him.

Reference

Clements, Theresa. *From Old Maloga: The Memoirs of an Aboriginal Woman*. Prahran, Vic.: Fraser & Morphett, 193?.

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