Preface: Ego-histoire

Bruce Pascoe

Winners write the history but, in the case of colonists, what they most often write is an excuse.

James Kirby, an early commentator on European–Aboriginal contact history on the Murray River, described the massive clay weirs built through the riverine system and only reluctantly admitted that they must have been built by Aboriginal people.

He describes a fishing system based on tension springs placed in purpose-built apertures in the weir walls. He watches as the fish spring the trap which plucks them from the river and deposits them beside the Aboriginal who casually places them in a basket and resets the trap. This process is repeated many times, although the Wati Wati man refuses to notice Kirby’s presence. He is showing off, disdainfully.

Kirby has witnessed a dam wall construction which represents a massive labour and technical investment, and is a fishing machine of grand design. Does Kirby reflect on this system from the point of view of the Aboriginal economy? No, he defaults to a position which justifies his theft of the land: ‘I had often heard of the indolence of the blacks and soon came to the conclusion after watching a blackfellow catch fish in such a lazy way, that what I had heard was perfectly true.’

This attitude bedevils black–white relations to this day; a deliberate misrepresentation of the Aboriginal economy by Europeans with more than enough education to understand the true position, should it be in their interests to do so.

The History Wars are not only between left and right views of the same event; they are between the perceptions of black and white when each tell the story of the country.

Australia has until recently rarely seen fit to include Aboriginal perceptions in its discussion of history and identity. For an Aboriginal person to open a book and read stories such as those told by Jeanine Leane, Phillip Morrissey, Vicki Grieves and Barry Judd is a remarkable and moving experience. Most historical reflections are written about us, not by us.
Across these essays there is a sense of the writers, black and white, talking together, a rare Australian experience. Jan Idle, Oliver Haag and Karen Hughes tell deeply personal stories of how their stories rub up against Aboriginal Australia. They stop becoming observers and become players in the events of Australian racial history.

John Docker’s story about his parents is deeply disturbing, not because it mentions Aboriginal people, but because it reveals how quickly ideas can become authoritarian. Docker’s mother, fortunately, is the questioner and if she passed anything on to her son it was the glory of doubt. We need to approach the accepted Australian history with doubt, not antagonism, just the clear-minded ability to wonder.

Ego-histoire is a call to patience and reflection, to listen to the stories of others, just as you would if you intended to honour the other with your love rather than your simple, adolescent curiosity.

Ego-histoire has the potential to begin removing the mask of colonial thought, but only if we are prepared to acknowledge the past. And isn’t that what historians are supposed to do?
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