Notes and Documents

*Aboriginal History* turns 21: Ann Curthoys’ speech in launching volume 21

After some delay, volume 21 of *Aboriginal History* was released on 14 September 1999. To mark the occasion the editorial board that day conducted a simple launching ceremony in the Jabal Centre, the Aboriginal students’ study centre at the Australian National University (ANU). The principal speaker at the ceremony was Professor Ann Curthoys, Manning Clark Professor of Australian History in the university’s School of Humanities. Professor Curthoys spoke as follows.

Welcome friends. Welcome to the Jabal Centre, and to this launch of the 21st volume of *Aboriginal History*.

This is an important occasion, a 21st birthday. I think we should all be proud this journal has lasted 21 years. The editors of the first issue were Diane Barwick and Robert Reece, with Andrew Markus review editor, and an editorial board which included Isabel McBryre, Luise Hercus, Hank Nelson, Niel Gunson, Nicholas Peterson, Lyndall Ryan, Charles Rowley, Peter Corris, and myself. Two of these people — Diane Barwick and Charles Rowley — have since passed away, and the journal commemorated their passing in important ways, but many of the rest of that first editorial board are still involved in the journal one way or another. Luise Hercus, in particular, is review editor of the issue I am launching today.

And there are many other stalwarts of the journal, not least Peter Read who has guided it through difficult years and without whom it may not today be thriving as it is. Another stalwart is Peter Grimshaw who was treasurer of the management committee for that first issue, and is still the treasurer for this issue, the 21st.

In recent years the journal has survived through the appointment of guest editors for every issue. As we all know, this has guaranteed quality and diversity, but it has not guaranteed speed. Accordingly, in 1998, Ian Howie-Willis was appointment managing editor, and he is located in our department, the History Department here at ANU. Though how much longer there will be a history department is currently in doubt, and the journal may shortly belong to some combined entity, like a School of Humanities. We will see. In any case, the appointment of a managing editor located on campus means that while the practice of inviting guest editors will continue from time to time, we now have a great deal more continuity in the editorial process, and trust that the journal will appear more regularly.
The 21 years of the journal have been a tumultuous 21 years, for Aboriginal people and politics, and for the discipline of history, and especially for the conjunction of the two, the field of Aboriginal history. Since 1977, when the first issue emerged, we have witnessed a great many changes in Aboriginal land title and in the political and administrative structures governing Aboriginal people’s lives. We have witnessed continuing Aboriginal cultural expression in painting, theatre, film, dance, and writing. Since 1977, we have lived through the Bicentennial protests, the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Police Custody, the Mabo and Wik cases and their legislative consequences, the Stolen Generations Report, and much else. In history, we have seen a growing interest in forms of narrative, in life writing, in environmental history, in cultural history. Historians have interacted with new theoretical developments in the humanities, centred around questions of cultural theory, post-structuralism, and the ever-present problem of historical truth and perspective. The intellectual landscape of the humanities and social scientists has changed considerably, as the disciplines of history, anthropology, archaeology, and linguistics, the disciplines that have primarily informed this journal, have interacted with and learned from one another in new ways. Book publications in Aboriginal history, both by historians such as Henry Reynolds, and the various forms of life-writing by indigenous authors, most notably Sally Morgan, have grown dramatically. The vast majority of books in this field were published after this journal began in 1977.

Despite this growth in book publication, the journal is as important as ever. It continues to publish ground-breaking articles and pertinent reviews. The journal has been a repository of excellent scholarship, widely used in teaching. I could not run the Australian Aboriginal history unit here at ANU without it.

Most of the historians working in the field have published in it, often with key articles that have since become foundational in teaching. I think of the very first article in the first issue, W.E.H. Stanner’s ‘The history of indifference thus begins’, or Peter Read’s ‘A rape of the soul so profound’ in a later issue, or Henry Reynolds’ article on nineteenth century Queensland and Francesca Merlan’s ‘Making people quiet’, both in volume 2. There was Richard Broome’s article on professional Aboriginal boxers, Robert Hall’s on Aborigines, the Army and the Second World War, and Stephen Muecke, Alan Rumsey and Banjo Wirramurra’s article on ‘Pigeon the outlaw: history as texts’. This article, in volume 9 in 1985, signalled the emergence of articles involving Aboriginal authorship, though it may not have been the first, and it was followed by others of sole authorship, such as Henrietta Fourmile’s much quoted ‘Who owns the past?’ in volume 13, and contributions from Gordon Briscoe, Mick Dodson, and others in volume 18.

This issue, then, follows in a grand tradition. It begins, sadly with several obituaries: to Fred McCarthy, Mick Miller, Isobel White, and Mum Shirl, all major figures in Aboriginal life and scholarship in this country. It then has an excellent article by John Maynard, about Fred Maynard and the Australian Aboriginal Progressive association, a product of the Stanner Fellowships scheme, sponsored by the Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies (ANU) and administered by the Board of Aboriginal history. John Maynard was the fellow in 1996, and was also at that time a visiting fellow in the History Department. As a detailed and researched account of his grandfather, this article
makes for some arresting and informative reading, and is a signal I think of a growing contribution to the journal from authors of Aboriginal descent.

I can’t mention all the eleven articles in this issue by name. All are well researched, and well written. Whether it is the Catholic missionary involvement in child removal, as so movingly written about by Christine Choo, or the influence of the contact with the Macassans on Yolgnu attitudes towards mining in Arnhem Land, or the scandalous treatment of Ralph Piddington in Western Australia in the 1930s — and there are others equally as interesting and important — we are in every case given a treat, in scholarship, research, analysis, and writing. Every article has something new to say. Bob Dixon’s translation of the story of Christie Palmerston, as told by George Watson, continues one of the traditional strengths of this journal, its use of linguistic expertise to record and translate indigenous people’s remembered histories.

And then there are the reviews, all, as usual, useful and informative, from people like Gordon Briscoe, Noel Loos, Neil Andrews and others. I especially liked Richard Kimber’s review of Diane Bell’s recent enormous book (and the review itself is long), assessing positive and negative qualities with equal measure and providing a model of appreciation and constructive criticism — enough to restore one’s faith in the reviewing process. Whether one agrees with Kimber or not, of course, depends on having read Bell’s book, which this review reminds me I must do.

So I think the appearance of volume 21 is indeed something to celebrate, both for itself, as a symbol of 21 years of influential and quality scholarship, and as an indication that there is a great deal more to come. Congratulations to the editors, Rob Paton and Di Smith, to Ingereth McFarlane who is credited with having provided them with substantial assistance, and to all the others involved in bringing this volume out. May there be many more to come!

Ann Curthoys

The Sally White/Diane Barwick Award

This award commemorates the great contributions that Sally White and Diane Barwick made to Aboriginal studies generally and to this journal in particular. The award, which is made on the recommendation of the journal’s editorial board, consists of a cash grant to assist indigenous scholars in undertaking current research projects.

The recipient for 2000 is Ms Jukie Appo of Bundaberg, Queensland. Ms Appo graduated in 1999 from Deakin University, Victoria, where she completed a Bachelor of Arts (Visual Design) degree within the Institute of Koorie Education. She is presently undertaking a BA(Hons) program at the Mitchelton, Brisbane, campus of the Australian Catholic University.

Ms Appo’s thesis topic at the Australian Catholic University is ‘An ethnographic study of the Burnett River, Queensland, rock engravings in the Gooreng Gooreng community’. The extensive Burnett River engravings appear to have been first recorded for the ethnographic literature by the Rev R.H. Mathews in 1901. In 1972 they became the subject of controversy when 96 of the rocks on which they were engraved were
removed and relocated to other parts of Queensland. Their removal was a catastrophe for the Gooreng Gooreng people, for whom the engravings constituted critical physical evidence linking them with their traditional lands. However, although the engravings are now widely dispersed, Ms Appo argues that the Gooreng Gooreng people regard them as ‘part of their identity...and monuments to their living, continuous culture’.

Ms Appo, who is herself a member of the Gooreng Gooreng people, believes that much of the recorded material on the engravings has disappeared. Her project involves interviewing Gooreng Gooreng elders to obtain their perspectives on the engravings and also visiting the present locations of the rocks to record and describe the engravings again.

The editorial board congratulates Ms Appo on her award and hopes that the results of her research will eventually be published in this journal.

The board also draws attention to the fact that it welcomes applications for grants under the Sally White and Diane Barwick Award scheme. It is currently calling for applications from Indigenous women who plan to do their honours year (i.e. equivalent of the fourth year in a Bachelor of Arts program) next year, 2001. People wishing to inquire about grants should contact Dr Peter Read at the Australian National University (phone: 02 6249 4685; email Peter.Read@anu.edu.au).

Ian Howie-Willis

**An interview with David Unaipon**

Few Aboriginal leaders have received the acclaim and respect given to the Reverend David Unaipon (1872–1967), whose portrait now appears on the Australian $50 note. Regarded as a genius and a scholar for most of his adult life, he proved the lie to the racial theories prevalent in the 1920s and 1930s, an era dominated by eugenics and flawed intelligence tests. The son of an Aboriginal evangelist, James Ngunaitponi and his wife Nymbulda, David was born at the Point McLeay Mission, South Australia, on 28 September 1872.

Encouraged to develop his artistic and scientific interests by kind patrons, he was frustrated by the mundane occupations provided and lack of opportunity for educated Aborigines. His flair for inventing, his polished speech and presentation and his impassioned motivation secured his position as a spokesman for his people. While the churches saw him as living proof of their evangelisation efforts, his individualism and outspokenness sometimes led to disagreements with his own people as well as with secular and religious authorities. Though he often suffered from discrimination when travelling he still remained relatively free from the official restraints placed on Aborigines.

From the 1920s onwards his fame increased through his publications on Aboriginal culture and mythology, his influence on Aboriginal policy and his continued interest in inventions which still occupied his mind in his nineties. In 1922 he was already a rising star. In that year he was interviewed by the English spiritualist Horace Leaf, who
was on a world tour following on the heels of a similar tour by his colleague and fellow spiritualist Sir Arthur Conan Doyle in 1920. While it is evident that Leaf acknowledged David Unaipon’s intellectual gifts it is apparent from the account of the interview that both the Presbyterian missionary and Leaf were reluctant to acknowledge full equality of mental capacity. This was for them, a theoretical position which they were bound to support; it was a position which would be held until the refutation of the Porteus intelligence tests.

Unaipon’s conviction that he was ‘a fair sample of what can be accomplished if the aborigines are taken in hand when young’ sent a clear message to his contemporaries that it was justifiable to remove Aboriginal children from what was considered a ‘degenerate’ environment. For Unaipon an Aboriginal youth must either grow up in a harsh tribal environment or be nurtured in a Christian home. Anything in between was degenerate brought about by the demoralisation of Aborigines by Europeans eager for their land.

The account of Leaf’s interview with David Unaipon which follows is taken from his book *Under the Southern Cross: A Record of a Pilgrimage* (with an introduction by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle), London 1923, pp.107–114. David Unaipon, after a strenuous life of preaching, lecturing, writing, and experimenting, died at Tailem Bend Hospital (South Australia) on 7 February 1967 and was buried at Point McLeay.

Nie! Gunson

One of the most remarkable men we met in Australia was Mr David Unaipon, a highly educated Christian aboriginal. We were introduced to him by the Rev. T.W. Leggett, Secretary of the Presbyterian Mission to the Australian Aborigines. Mr Leggett is of the opinion that the intellectual powers of the aborigines are very much under-rated although they may not be equal to those of white people. David has been educated by the Mission since he was a child, and shows an unusually high mentality. He is a charming personality, and an inventor of considerable merit. Before the war he devised an aeroplane, but destroyed it on moral grounds; the thought of it being used to destroy life was too repugnant to him. The Government is offering a prize for the best sheep-shearing machine, and it is admitted that the one invented by David is the most effective of those that have, up till now, been submitted. The object of the machine is to cut the wool without damaging the animal’s skin.

David is a fine preacher, speaking splendid English, and he is also a good Latin and Greek scholar. According to Mr Leggett, he read Newton’s *Principia* through and understood even the mathematical equations at the first reading. So capable is he that the Presbyterians purposed sending him shortly on a missionary tour to Tasmania.

I found Mr Unaipon to be a very well-preserved man of medium stature, clean shaven, and about 50 years of age. An exceedingly pleasant personality, with a charming voice, and quiet confident manner. His conversational powers are excellent, and except for his colour he would pass for a cultured Englishman of more than average intelligence. Intensely interested in the education and general improvement of his own race, he believes that properly dealt with they could be educated in a generation. He is convinced that he is a fair sample of what can be
accomplished if the aborigines are taken in hand when young. He complained that the popular opinion of his race was framed on the comparatively few degenerates met with around the borders of civilisation, or in the towns; a very unfair and misleading method of judgment. The common assertion that they are lazy is a libel against the aboriginal when in his native state. The white man is responsible for this obvious defect among those who have come under his influence. His desire to become possessed of the black fellow’s land has resulted in reducing the aborigines to a state of indolence discreditable and harmful to the race.

‘What happens when the white man wishes to possess native territory?’ said David. ‘In the early days he would simply have taken it without compunction, even shooting the native if he thought it necessary. Now he must get it by gentler means; so what does he do? He approaches the aboriginal with offers and promises. ‘You sittem down, Jimmy,’ says he. ‘We givem you food and clothes and tobacco. You no workem. We workem and feedem you. See, Jimmy?’ Jimmy naturally sees, and sits down, and eats and drinks and smokes. He can reasonably do nothing else. Aware of the irresistible power of the white man, he, as a rational being, yields to it. Thus he cultivates bad habits foreign to his native state.’

This is certainly typical of what we saw when we visited the Aborigines’ Reserve established by the Government of New South Wales at La Perouse. In a few crudely built houses in a large field overlooking beautiful Botany Bay, and near enough to Sydney to enable him to reach it without much trouble, the aboriginal lives with his half-caste friends and idles the day away. How different this mode of life must be when compared with that of his tribal state, in which he must rely on his ability as a huntsman and fisherman to obtain his daily food or starve! The Rev. Frank Paton, writing recently, gives a graphic picture of the method by which the white settler dispossessed the aboriginal of his native land and degraded him:

As the white settlements spread, the settlers took the best of the land for their cattle, and the native retreated before them. But they had to keep within their tribal boundaries, or be attacked by other tribes. This meant that, when the best of their own land was gone, the natives could no longer live in their usual way of hunting, and they knew no other method. And, as they could not live in their old way, some of them began to spear the white man’s cattle, instead of the kangaroo and opossums, which were dying out. This brought upon them the anger and revenge of the settlers. Though some white men treated them kindly, others were very cruel, and hunted them like wild animals. Thus, deprived of their usual food, the remnants of the tribe gradually became idlers, hanging about the white settlements, and there they learnt all the vices of civilisation, without its virtues. Drink, opium, and evil diseases, and consumption carried on their deadly work, and even Christian people did not realise for a long time that they owed any duty to the aborigines.

David mentioned that a careful study of the tribal customs of the aborigines reveals very good reasons for them, even when they appear cruel and unnecessary. The arduous conditions of their native state makes it essential that only the fittest shall be permitted to survive. To assure this, three tests are applied to each individual, male or female. They are:

1. The mastery of appetite.
2. The mastery of pain.
3. The mastery of fear.
The first test, the mastery of appetite, takes place when the children of both sexes are approaching adolescence. The headman of the tribe then informs them that they must not allow their appetites to master them. 'It is,' he says, 'like an old man inside you who will make you do everything good or bad that he wants you to do, unless you master him.' After seriously explaining to them the importance of the test they are to undergo, he sends them away to think the matter over and acquaint him later whether they are prepared to undergo the trial or not. The children invariably return, stating that they are ready to face the ordeal.

Then for two days they are compelled to abstain from all food, the tribe meanwhile moving rapidly from place to place so as to exhaust the children and increase their hunger and thirst. They are obliged to watch the others prepare and eat food, but must not show the slightest inclination to eat or drink themselves. At sunrise on the third morning, when the children's appetite is thought to be most keen, the elder says they may eat and drink. A tasty meal is slowly and elaborately prepared before them, increasing their pangs of hunger. Now begins the most important part of the ordeal. On receiving the food each child is expected to show no unusual avidity nor to eat more than it was in the habit of eating before the fast. The communal as well as the personal value of the test is obvious. The mastery of appetite guarantees the individual's power to go without food during the periods of want sometimes frequently occasioned by lack of game or drought, without attempting to take what belongs to another without permission.

The control of pain is a more severe trial and equally important to the life of the tribe. Boys and girls are, when a little older, subjected to the severest tortures which they must undergo without flinching. Without previous warning the young girls may be flung on their backs while their two front teeth are knocked out by a stick about nine inches long being struck with a stone hammer. At another time their chest or stomach or face may be cut open with a stone knife, previously dipped in hot ashes. The reason for the knife being made hot, is to make the operation more painful, and also to cauterise the wound and hasten the healing of it. The boys are made to lie on hot ashes and are burnt so severely that when they rise from their uncomfortable bed their backs are covered with blisters. The tests for the conquest of fear are equally trying.

Whoever fails to pass all these tests is regarded as degenerate and unfit, and usually destroyed or rendered impotent. The method usually adopted for destroying these unfortunates is curious but less painful than the tests. Like most primitive races, the aborigines of Australia are well acquainted with the power of suggestion and inherently subject to its influence. Much of their magic is based upon it. They generally destroy degenerates by means of it, through the process known as 'pointing the sticks'. There are several ways of doing this, and all are regarded as effective. In this case, however, a well-concerted scheme involving the co-operation of several people, including the medicine man, is arranged. An individual is told off to engage the doomed man in conversation, and another to lie near them and keep staring at the victim, who has, of course, not been let into the secret of the method. After a while the degenerate, observing the man persistently staring at him, will inform his companion, saying 'I wonder why so and so keeps staring at me.' 'Ah,' replies the other, 'he's pointing the sticks at you.' This information will greatly disturb the degenerate's mind, for this form of magic is greatly dreaded.

A little later a specially attractive meal of emu's fat will be prepared by the tribe under the supervision of the headman. Emu's fat is a special delicacy, greatly liked
by aborigines, and if it is eaten in large quantities causes biliousness. Orders are secretly issued that all but the doomed man must eat frugally; he, however, is encouraged to over-eat, with the result that he becomes very sick. His enemies inform him that this is owing to the 'sticks' having entered him and doing their deadly work. They then advise him to consult the medicine man, who gives the final emphasis to the suggestion. Carefully examining the man he suddenly produces some splinters of wood or sharp pieces of stone, declaring that they are part of his 'sticks' which, alas, have entered the victim's liver, stomach, and kidneys, or some other vulnerable part of the body. The rest the medicine man pretends to be unable to extract as the 'sticks' are too deeply embedded, a statement which is equal to a death sentence, for the individual goes away fully persuaded that his case is hopeless, and lies down and dies. We saw several examples of these 'sticks' in various parts of the country.

The power of the medicine men over their tribesmen is extraordinary, and, as is usual in such cases, the line between the occult and trickery is difficult to discover. The term 'blackfellow-doctor' is used to express those who have psychic and magical powers as well as those who merely heal. They have rain-makers, seers, spirit mediums, and bards, who employ their poetic faculties for purposes of enchantment. The wizards are everywhere credited with the power of conveying themselves through the air, or of being conveyed by spirits from place to place. Numerous cases are given by the natives of wizards 'going up,' although this usually takes place in darkness. This may be because of the deleterious effect of light on psychic force, or because it hides the witch-doctor's deceit. If it be true that the return is frequently accompanied by means of a tree, down which he descends and finally jumps to the ground, it must be admitted that these circumstances are suspicious.

His powers of psychometry are supposed to be wonderful. Not only can he 'read' from articles that have been owned and used by other people, the nature and destiny of their owners; he can also use them as a means through which to transfer to those owners an evil or good influence. The belief is that anything that has once been in contact with a person is, by some occult link, always in touch with him. Through this invisible connection the wizard casts his spell upon his unfortunate victim.

The sorcerers are not induced to exercise their powers without some material reward — they all demand payment in kind. Some of their patrons give presents for favours received; others from fear of possible injuries. The sorcerers are not particular, and will gladly take such items as weapons, rags, implements, and especially game.

No one seems to know how the sorcerers acquire their mysterious powers, although some form of qualification is obviously necessary before the confidence of their fellow tribesmen can be won. They seem to surround themselves with an air of profound mystery. Some tribes say that the ghosts of ancestors visit a sleeping man and communicate to him the secrets of sorcery. Others believe that the gifts are bestowed by some supernatural being who inserts, by very material means, occult powers into the selected man's body.

According to some writers, Australian aborigines have no religion beyond the dread of ghosts and evil spirits. They certainly are supposed to have no worship, even of idols. This belief in ghosts only, does not apply to all tribes. The Kamilaroi tribe in the north-west of New South Wales, believe in Baiame, the maker of all things, and the reverter of men according to their conduct. He it is who sees and
knows all, being kept well informed by a lower deity who presides at the initiation ceremonies. Another deity acts as a mediator. The latter has a wife who has charge over the instruction of women. The Spirit – that which speaks and thinks within men – does not die with the body, but ascends to Baiame, or it may wander about on earth, or enter a wild animal or white man. The belief that when an aboriginal dies he reincarnates as a white man is no doubt of recent growth. A native expressed this belief in the following words: ‘When black-fella tumble down, he jump up all same white-fella.’

It is probable that this idea originated at the time William Buckley, the escaped convict, was found by the aborigines. Whilst wandering about he saw some spears and other native implements on a grave and took them along with him. The natives who found him thought he was their late chief returned to earth as he was carrying the dead chief’s weapons. Many tribes believe that the spirits of the dead return to their old haunts, and that sooner or later they will be born again. The idea is more developed in some tribes, who believe the sexes alternate at each successive incarnation.

I spoke to David Unaipon on the question of the belief of the aborigines in God and the hereafter, and he assured me that they believe in God, but never mention His name as it is too sacred. They pray, but ‘they always pray for someone else. They ask that they may have good hunting, for instance, so as to supply their children with food. They also believe in the Son of God. The name they give him means ‘Rock,’ and when an individual dies they sometimes crucify the body, stretching it out because they think it pleases God. The next world,’ said David, ‘is conceived as being like the earth, only better, and all people go to the same place. They do not believe in two places, heaven and hell.’

I asked David whether he knew of any belief among the aborigines of the possibility of communicating with the dead. The belief, he assured me, was common that the spirits of the dead often returned to advise and guide the living. A belief closely resembling the ‘calling’ mentioned by Dr Samuel Johnson prevails among them. The spirits are not seen, but can sometimes be heard speaking, and on such occasions they come to warn of impending danger. David has himself twice experienced this phenomenon, his deceased father’s voice warning him and thus saving his life. On both occasions he was walking on a very dark night in a district little known to him, when the voice called upon him to halt. Obeying the command, he carefully examined his whereabouts, and found that had he moved a step further he would have fallen down a disused mine shaft.

‘What was the voice like?’ I enquired.

‘Exactly like my father’s.’

‘Was it clear and distinct?’

‘Perfectly. Just as when I had known him on earth.’

‘Are you confident it was to warn you?’

‘Yes. Remember, another step and I should have been a dead man. I had absolutely no knowledge of the existence of the pit-holes, and could not possibly have seen them without careful examination.’
Pain of losing places, people

On 16 April 2000, the Sunday Times (the Sunday edition of the Canberra Times newspaper) published an interview with Peter Read, present chair of the Committee of Management and Editorial Board of Aboriginal History. The interviewing journalist was Ian Warden, and the report of his interview ran under the above heading. The report is reprinted here.

Dr Peter Read coined the phrase ‘stolen generations’. He still thinks taking Aboriginal children away was wickedness, writes Ian Warden.

In 1980 the ANU’s Dr Peter Read, a scholarly but passionate historian, was mining the NSW state archives when he began to unearth great big nuggets of wickedness. He was excited and appalled.

‘I’d go and grab anyone I knew who was working there in the archives,’ he recalled last week ‘and I’d say ‘Jesus Christ! Come and look at this!’ and I’d show them this stuff [official records of how and why Aboriginals were taken away from their families and reserves and sometimes, in Dr Read’s words, ‘driven mad by the state’] and say ‘Can you believe it?’

Dr Read, usually a quietly industrious man who researches and writes books about the pain of dispossession and about what he calls Australia’s ‘lost places’ is having 15 minutes of public limelight (the 15 minutes Andy Warhol said we all will have) because the nation is debating the ‘stolen generations’ (Dr Read insists on the plural) and because it is a subject he knows a lot about.

He began reading the records in 1980 and then in 1981 wrote a book called The Stolen Generations. Never in any doubt that the taking away of the children was ‘wicked’ and ‘attempted genocide’ he was just what the doctor ordered for the 7.30 Report’s Kerry O’Brien a few days ago. The liberal O’Brien, like many other Australians, got himself into a state over the prime minister’s and Senator Heron’s flint-hearted and semantic calculation that there had never been such a thing as the stolen generation.

Dr Read is 55, and very tall and lives in Turner and walks to work at the ANU’s Centre for Cross-Cultural Research. His workplace sounds from its name as though it might churn out esoteric things but in fact his most recent book, Returning To Nothing — The Meaning of Lost Places, is a social history and an oral history about the sorts of losses of dear places and dear things almost all of us will suffer in some form or other. His book discusses, among other things, the destruction of Darwin by Cyclone Tracy and the pain of the people who lost their city, the feelings of the farmers of Namadgi and the high country who were forced to go away to make way for national parks, the feelings of the people of the suburb of Beecroft and the towns of Adaminaby, Yallourn and Macedon forced by governments (and in Macedon’s case by bushfire) out of the places they loved, one housewife’s emotions over leaving the family farm, a Canberra Croatian’s horror on going to Croatia in 1993 and finding that the civil war of the 1990s had demolished the family home of 600 years, and the grief of the daughter of the Weetangera postmistress when the family had to move from the post office in 1970.

The chapter about the ACT’s Namadgi National Park made this reporter squirm. In the 1970s and 1980s in my fashionable greenness I was one of those who thought that there should be a kind of cleansing in national parks of all farms and all traces of white activity. It was in this spirit that the authorities destroyed so many of the huts of Kosciuszko. Peter Read’s chapter ‘Namadgi: Sharing The
High Country' is the story of how farmer Granville Crawford, forced to leave, loved and cared about Namadgi every bit as sensitively as any of us who, in our Goretex ensembles, spent weekends walking and climbing there and insisting that pristine nature should be enabled to swarm back, and that in such a place cows were rats and cattle yards and fences were eyesores. Mr Crawford's heart was broken, and he said so in interviews with Dr Read and in the rough but heartfelt poetry that he wrote about his feelings and that are reproduced in Returning To Nothing.

'I've always been a historian who carries a tape recorder wherever I go', Dr Read explains.

'And I think [half-joking, half-serious now] if we all carried a tape recorder we'd all be much more passionate than we are because we just don't know what's going on in a community until you talk to its people. And when you do, how can you be anything but passionate when you hear their stories?'

'I'm a real 'place person'. I've always, from my earliest memories, been attracted by abandoned places. I still am. And when I received an ARC grant about seven years ago to investigate the meaning of places in Australia I realised I should be working on what touches me most closely. Lost places, abandoned places, places that no longer exist for some reason or other. That's the place part of me working there and then the oral historian in me chimed in and said, “Well, you'd better go and talk to people who've lost their places. Don't just go and look at the places and read the records because there's more to the story than this.” And of course as soon as you hear the story of someone who's been dispossessed you realise what a powerful story it is, and one which cuts across many of the preoccupations of our society.'

Dispossessions, he says, touch people irrespective of their gender, race, class, nationality and political allegiances.

'We've got to realise that we're not only entitled to, but we really do sink our roots into places and there's no point in following political correctness and saying [to people, like farmers, we might disapprove of] you shouldn't do that. It's very destructive both to those individuals and to all of us as Australians seeking the ways in which we can all belong to each other. We mustn't try to deny the right of people of whom we disapprove to love, to be attached to, and form long, very lasting affections for places. It just does happen.'

On the newsworthy matter, Dr Read says that we have to talk about stolen generations, plural, because the process began as long ago as 1814. He says that John Howard is quite wrong when he says that the taking away of children and older Aboriginals was well meant, 'because the records themselves make it perfectly obvious that the intention was not the best interests of the child but the convenience of the state'.

What the state wanted, and quite openly said it wanted, was to see to it that worthless Aboriginal society was abolished by taking away young Aboriginals and making them live the sorts of white lives that would cure them of any affection for their own primitive, filthy culture. Taken away, brothers and sisters might see each other every two or three years but often not at all. The 1921 report of the Aborigines Welfare Board discussed the solving of the 'Aboriginal problem' by continuing to take Aboriginal children away from their parents to put them in the care of whites. What the Board meant by the 'Aboriginal problem', Dr Read says, was the resistance that Aboriginals showed to being told to live as white people
told them to. Another thing the state often sought by removing Aboriginals from one place to another was to rid respectable white towns of the amenity-spoiling presence of blacks living such uncivilised and perhaps not very law-abiding lives nearby and generally letting down the neighbourhood. In 1936 in NSW, Dr Read points out, you could be arrested on suspicion of being an Aboriginal and driven out of the town, and the onus was on the accused to prove that they weren't Aboriginal.

Dr Read studied the records and then went out to meet the people who were in the records and who were still alive.

'I saw those records as a historian and then I met those people about who those files were written. Putting those experiences together you realised not only that it was a wicked policy but that the results, the walking and talking people, were all affected to some degree.'

The emotional and physical impacts on Aboriginal people of the policy have, he says, been catastrophic. It's commonplace for the living victims to believe that they were taken away by the state because they weren't wanted by their parents and families and/or to have all of their self-esteem taken away by what the state did to them. Many have died long, long before they should have from illnesses caused or exacerbated by their ordeals.

There seem to be no men living who as boys were taken away and put in the Kinchela Home between 1939 and 1969. They all seem, Dr Read thinks, to have died 15 or 20 years before they should have.

'How can all this be anything but wickedness?' Dr Read wonders.

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