

Of a ‘contested ground’ and an ‘indelible stain’: a difficult reconciliation between Australia and its Aboriginal history during the 1990s and 2000s

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This article proposes an interpretative narrative of the evolution of Aboriginal history as a scholarly enterprise during the 1990s and in more recent years.¹ The 1990s were characterised by attempts to synthesise the interpretative traditions resulting from previous decades of scholarly activity. In more recent years, the debate has shifted dramatically, dealing specifically with the genocidal nature of white Australia’s policy towards Aboriginal peoples. The most important passages in this process are associated with the 1992 Mabo decision by the Australian High Court and the publication of the *Bringing them home* report of 1997.²

During the 1990s, the relationship between particular political shifts and related historical writings in Australia was comprehensively transformed and became much more direct. The writing and interpretation of history have commonly been a site for direct political contestation, but in the 1990s political agendas became an informing feature of historiographical debates more than in previous decades.³ One outstanding example of this tendency is John Howard’s successful domination of the political scene – an ascendancy based also on an explicit and unambiguous effort to ‘reconquer’ history for the Liberal camp.⁴ In this context, an array of conservative opinions has challenged academic discourse. Nonetheless, both academic commentators and Aboriginal people successfully linked the ‘unsurrendered’ character of native title and, later, of Aboriginal sovereignty to both the resistential and the collaborative practices of

1. My review is selective. The works chosen for inclusion are intended as ‘snapshots’ of the ongoing historiographical debate. For other works outlining the evolution of Aboriginal history as a scholarly enterprise, see Mulvaney 1964: 1–56; Coltheart 1984; Reynolds 1984 and Curthoys 1998. See also reviews by Attwood 1995 and McGrath 1995: 359–397.

2. National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families (Australia) 1997.

3. For example, see Watson 2002. Don Watson, Paul Keating’s speechwriter, whose book *Recollections of a bleeding heart* won the *Age* Book of the Year prize in 2002, pays constant attention to the production and reproduction of historical discourse.

4. See Brawley 1996.

Aboriginal communities. Parallel to this consolidation, public agendas and discourses about 'Aboriginality' developed in a way that necessarily referred to ongoing debates about the experience of Aboriginal peoples.

During the late 1990s and early 2000s, an important shift in the drive behind historical writing has been a series of public debates following the activities and conclusions of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission's *Bringing them home* report. In this context, many historical contributions published in more recent years have either insisted on the genocidal nature of Australia's political record or attempted to dismiss such a claim. This notion was certainly not new – art historian Bernard Smith had already detected a genocidal trauma in Australia's psyche as early as 1980 and Henry Reynolds has convincingly demonstrated that the denunciation of these practices was at the centre of Australia's humanitarian tradition since the 19th century.⁵ However, during the early 2000s this debate has acquired an unprecedented significance and become a paradigmatic feature of Australia's historiographical landscape.

This article emphasises how quickly both historiographies and political questions move and the strong relations between them (although the lengthy gestation time of most history books means there is often some disjunction between the two). Although it concentrates on the more recent period, my reading of the evolution of the historiography of the Aboriginal experience entails four successive waves. During the 1960s and early 1970s, the first wave of historical writing established a dialectical opposition between Aboriginal absence and Aboriginal presence. This concluded with an unequivocal argument for both Aboriginal destruction and survival, a solution that dialectically synthesised the initial dichotomy.⁶ Throughout the late 1970s and early 1980s, a second phase proposed the existence of a struggle between Aboriginal passivity and Aboriginal challenge. This dialectical tension was then superseded through the full establishment of Aboriginal political resistance as a recognised interpretative paradigm.⁷ Thus, the third phase in the late 1980s and early 1990s represented the tension between Aboriginal strategies of confrontation and collaboration with invaders. It was concluded by the reaffirmation of both, and of Aboriginal agency as an interpretative category. It was, again, a synthesis of two opposing conceptions.⁸

The fourth, still unfinished, wave of historiographical transformation commenced during the 1990s. Once Aboriginal autonomy had been fully recognised as an interpretative notion, dialectical oppositions can be seen to have shifted once again to be replaced by the tension between unsundered sovereignty and unilateral extinguishment of native rights to land. The explicit appraisal of an Australian pattern of 'genocide', including consideration of whether this is an appropriate term to apply in Australian history, currently informs history debates. It entails a synthesis of both continuity of sovereignty and the processes of dispossession, allowing for the assessment of genocidal practices together with irreparable losses of autonomy by Aboriginal communities. For example, the 2001 issue of *Aboriginal History* was entitled "'Genocide"? Australian Aboriginal history in international perspective'.⁹ It presented a collective statement that had been

5. Smith 1980; Reynolds 1998.

6. See Rowley 1972; Reynolds 1972.

7. See Blainey 1975; Reynolds 1982.

8. See Reynolds 1990; McGrath 1995.

decades in the making and authoritatively recapitulated recent historiographical reflection on Australia's genocidal trauma. Keith Windschuttle's 'denialism' has not ultimately challenged this wave of historiographical transformation.¹⁰

In summary, during the last two decades historians have followed a complicated intellectual itinerary and wrestled with questions of Aboriginal agency, white responsibility, destruction, and survival. A survey of the historiographical debates ultimately challenges Windschuttle's (and Geoffrey Blainey's) picture of an 'Aboriginal industry' that supposedly emphasises genocide, fabricates mass killings, and accentuates separate cultures.¹¹ The series of changes in historiographical focus cannot be seriously constructed as a conspiracy of intellectuals. Windschuttle's representation of Aboriginal historians and historical scholarship emerges as oversimplifying and inaccurate.

The first part of this article outlines the evolution of Aboriginal history during the 1990s; the second part outlines some of the debates that followed the publication of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission's *Bringing them home* report.

The 'Age of Mabo'

The High Court decisions of 1992 and 1996 on the Mabo and Wik cases had a tremendous impact on the received interpretation of Australia's race relations, and the historiographical consequences of these deliberations informed the debates of the 1990s.¹² Bain Attwood has perceptively described the connection between Mabo and the historical debate that followed:

Mabo and the new Australian history ends the historical silence about the Aboriginal pre-colonial and colonial past upon which the conservative invention of Australia and Australianness was founded, and since their Australia was realised through and rests upon that conventional historical narrative, the end of this history constitutes for them the end of Australia.¹³

The Mabo decision legally acknowledged Indigenous occupation and the possible recognition of property rights for a substantial number of Aboriginal communities. The Keating government legislated in the spirit of the High Court's views on Aboriginal rights. While native title was accepted and ownership transferred in some regions, 'Aboriginal Reconciliation' fully entered the government agenda after the then Prime Minister's 'Redfern Park Speech' in 1992.¹⁴ After Mabo, discussion of invasion, settlement and dispossession became a part of current affairs.

In a response to the need to investigate native title under the terms that emerged from the Mabo decision, one of the main subjects of historical inquiry during the 1990s became the detection of unbroken connections between Aboriginal communities and their landholdings. This approach emphasised local history projects and localism as the focus for the research; not many overviews of Aboriginal history and sovereignty were

9. Curthoys & Docker 2001. For a discussion about this volume of *Aboriginal History*, see Veracini 2002.

10. See Australian Council of Professional Historians Associations Inc 2003; Manne 2003.

11. See Gare et al 2003; Blainey 2003.

12. See for example Rowse 1993; Brennan 1998.

13. Attwood 1996: 116.

14. Reproduced in Grattan 2000: 60–64.

proposed during this phase.¹⁵ Consequently, whether Aboriginal resistance had been of a 'collaborative' kind or of a more 'challenging' type – or a combination of both – became less significant than in previous decades. For example, the acknowledgment of native title and the process of Aboriginal Reconciliation promoted a type of research less interested in open resistance: Aboriginal communities could claim native title through the historical recovery of their participation in pastoral enterprises, and the need for reconciliation encouraged a rhetorical emphasis on negotiation rather than conflict, casualties, and violence.

For example, Attwood and Arnold's *Power, knowledge and the Aborigines* focussed on ideological processes rather than violence as a way to interpret the historical experience of Aboriginal people.¹⁶ The authors, explicitly referring to Edward Said's work, were producing a critique of the conceptual and ideological apparatuses of knowledge-constructing notions such as the 'Aborigines' and 'Aboriginality'. They interpreted 'Aboriginalism' as the Australian substitute for 'Orientalism':

Aboriginalism, furthermore, disempowers Aborigines because they are made into an object of knowledge over which European Australians, as the dispensers of truth about their needs and requirements, gain control. Aboriginalism can, moreover, be seen to have produced the reality it has imagined by influencing government policies and practices which have, in turn, determined Aborigines' terms of existence – racialising the Aboriginal social body and so making Aborigines of the indigenous population. Hence it would be a mistake to see Aboriginalism as merely epiphenomenal and therefore unimportant; rather it is a hegemonic system of theory and practice which has permeated colonial structures of power.¹⁷

Brutality aside, two centuries of humanitarian intervention on the 'Aboriginal question' were now being postulated as problematic. In the process, nearly three recent decades of rewriting of Aboriginal history were also being challenged. Attwood and Arnold's problematisation of Aboriginality, exposing the nature of 'Aboriginalism' and identifying its strategies, constituted a redefining critique of the academic strategies employed until then to deal with Aboriginal issues.

An example of this transition towards an analysis of cultural resistance is represented by Peggy Brock's *Outback ghettos*.¹⁸ The disarticulation of Aboriginal society which followed invasion, Brock argues, was not complete, and her book explores the previously unacknowledged extent to which Aboriginal 'agency' had successfully prevented assimilationist policies from succeeding. Institutionalising and protectionist practices had not broken a powerful mix of passive resistance and concealed challenge. Of course, Aboriginal people 'had to redefine themselves if they were to survive', but this 'understanding was not imposed on them; they chose it over other options. Those who chose not to redefine themselves may well have been those who did not ultimately survive'.¹⁹

15. One exception was McGrath 1995. It should be noted that this volume was one historiographical outcome of another commission of inquiry, the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, RCIADC 1991.

16. Attwood and Arnold 1992.

17. Attwood and Arnold 1992: ii–iii; see also Said 1978.

18. Brock 1993.

19. Brock 1993: 156.

Laying a stress on Aboriginal agency, adaptation, adjustment, flexibility and resilience, Brock's suggestion is to 'see Aborigines making themselves rather than being made'.²⁰ White Australia had steadily attempted to extinguish separate Aboriginal identities and autonomies, yet, despite its power, it had rarely succeeded, and institutionalisation had frequently worked in the direction of intensifying local identities, allowing Aboriginal resistance to sometimes use and subvert a repressive regime.²¹ Moreover, Brock argues that institutions had provided Aboriginal resistance with the opportunity to establish and consolidate new and stronger community ties despite continued pressure. The new historiographical phase of the early 1990s was shifting the focus of attention from episodes of violent Aboriginal challenge (or collaboration) to the analysis of a successful *praxis* of resistance. It should be noted that the institutionalisation of Aboriginal people had been a central aspect of many reflections on Aboriginal issues since the publication of CD Rowley's trilogy in the early 1970s.²² Now, however, rather than a vehicle for the destruction of Aboriginal society, Brock proposes that institutionalisation was a vehicle for Aboriginal resistance and survival, and the traditional interpretation redirected.

Dawn May's *Aboriginal labour and the cattle industry*, published in 1994, also made a dramatic contribution to the ongoing reassessment of Aboriginal resistance under European control.²³ The book concentrates on the north Queensland pastoral frontier, but the narrative implicates the rest of the pastoral north as well. While highlighting the continuous dependence of pastoral stations on Aboriginal labour, May shows how many Indigenous groups had been able and willing to adjust to a new economy. Whereas Aboriginal labour had often guaranteed the very viability of the pastoral station,

Aboriginal people were not abandoning their own mode of production. They were in fact trying to accommodate the European system into their own. They quickly realized that in exchange for labour in cattle stations, they could legitimately live on their own land and practice many aspects of their old life in a modified form.²⁴

May shows pastoral and Aboriginal worlds as compatible and coexisting, in many ways mutually supporting each other. After an earlier phase of violent confrontation, they had frequently found a *modus vivendi* that was suitable to both worlds. Aboriginal labour was available in a context of dire labour shortage, offering skills – both new and traditional – appropriate for the 'open range' system of pastoralism, and was, most importantly, cheap. At the same time, the provision of goods and rations and a continued residence on customary land meant that a traditional lifestyle and customary obligations to land could be retained. Moreover, this 'articulation of the Aboriginal and capitalist systems' offered two other elements that made accommodation possible: it generally left sacred sites intact and, because of its seasonal nature, allowed Aboriginal landholders performance of culturally necessary obligations.²⁵ However, May notes

20. Brock 1993: 156.

21. See also Kidd 1997.

22. See Rowley 1972a, 1972b, 1972c. For an analysis of the theme of institutionalisation and Rowley's role in informing academic and political practice, see Rowse 1993: 27–54.

23. May 1994.

24. May 1994: 57.

25. See May 1994: 85–94.

that while such an accommodation gave Aboriginal communities more than relatively secure residence and some access to European goods, the unwritten terms of this accommodation often entailed an almost complete control over the affairs of the black community.

According to May's narrative, this accommodation was increasingly challenged after the 1890s, decades after the first pastoral stations had been established in north Queensland and Aboriginal people had been 'let in'. This happened only when growing competition for jobs, increasing use of fencing, enhanced missionary activities and, most significantly, reinforced state intervention created the conditions for a widespread reduction of the Aboriginal contribution to the cattle economy. In sum, *Aboriginal labour and the cattle industry* is a case study which highlights Aboriginal agency while providing a model for the interpretation of the pastoral invasion of Australia. May's work also has a more practical implication: as the ultimate dispossession of Aboriginal communities had happened at a much later stage than previously acknowledged, the notion that many Aboriginal communities could claim their native title – a title that had not been relinquished during the pastoral age – was now being supported by an established pattern of historical inquiry.

Important interpretative shifts were also being proposed at the level of general surveys. For its comprehensiveness and for the authority of its contributors, as well as for addressing the issue of invasion in an innovative way, *Contested ground* represented a landmark in the historiography of Aboriginal people.²⁶ Although this book was criticised as a 'missed opportunity' for failing to provide a fully inter-state comparative historical understanding, the book's aim of presenting readily accessible state histories to a larger public was met, and for the first time.²⁷ While recognising that the multiplicity of factors involved in Aboriginal histories created a 'myriad of regional variations', Ann McGrath, the editor of the book, defended its inclusive approach: 'invasion' and 'settlement', issues involving a fundamental premise of the nation's establishment, could no longer be avoided.²⁸ Her interpretative proposal was to override the opposition between the two and to include both understandings in the picture of frontier Australia:

after all, why is it always posited as invasion *or* settlement? Why not invasion *and* settlement? Or settlement *and* invasion? In trying desperately to achieve 'political correctness' there is a danger that some aspects might be exaggerated at the expense of others.²⁹

This book was in many ways also summarising the body of research that had been carried out during the previous decades and suggesting a synthesis of its main interpretative strands of resistance and collaboration:

it was the very nature of colonialism that coloniser and colonised came together. In many such meetings, murder, rape, pillage, deceit occurred, but there was also co-operation, affection, generosity, loyalty, even love. As well as a history of con-

26. McGrath 1995.

27. Review by Markus 1998: 233.

28. McGrath 1995: xxvi.

29. McGrath 1995: xxviii.

flict and domination, there was also a history of negotiation, compromise and exchange.³⁰

An effort towards the incorporation of conflicting images was repeatedly proposed as the way out of an historiographical impasse. Similarly, the collection of essays *In the age of Mabo* also stresses the notion that the Aboriginal past was, and could not be other than, 'contested ground'. The essays interpret the consolidation of what Bain Attwood defined as 'the new Australian history' as a process stemming from the re-emergence of Aboriginal people in the written Australian historical landscape after a century and a half of almost complete exclusion.³¹ In the process, while historians had contributed remarkably to the redescription of an Australian identity, Aboriginal history was reshaping the whole of Australian historiography:

'The Aborigine' or Aboriginality has become central to the defining of Australian nationhood and identity to an unprecedented degree. Aboriginality has probably always been an element in the construction of Australian identity, but whereas its role was previously premised upon it being construed as a lack (*vis-a-vis* Australia's 'whiteness', modernity, progress, etc), its significance now derives from it being imagined in positive terms, indeed upon it being idealised.³²

In the 'age of Mabo' Aboriginal history and 'invasion' finally came to be the issues around which a further renegotiation of Australia's identity and relation to its past were to be elaborated, Attwood argues.³³ Such redefinition is ongoing, despite popular mythologies and despite the gap between general public perception and academic discourse – a gap, however, which is steadily and dangerously growing. Aware of this gap, Attwood expresses concerns about simply reversing a historiographical tradition:

There are also flaws evident in the construction of a new Australian identity from the materials of the past. First, there is the risk in populist (rather than academic) histories that we merely replace one unsatisfactory past in which we uncritically celebrate the founders of Australia, with another in which we merely 'exorcise their disturbing legacy'.³⁴

In a dialectical way similar to McGrath's conflation of 'settlement' and 'invasion', Attwood proposes a partial abandonment of the interpretative trends which had emerged since the 1970s. He proposes instead to insist on 'compromise' rather than 'exploitation' as the most appropriate model for understanding Aboriginal-white relations and on accommodation rather than disarticulation.

In a similar way, placing equal emphasis on both, a synthesis of the dialectic dyad represented by 'compromise' and 'resistance' is also the proposed interpretative pattern of Heather Goodall's *Invasion to embassy*.³⁵ In the first part of her narrative, Goodall describes a complex system of accommodation, a compact which had suited both pastoralists' needs and those of Aboriginal landholders for a long period. The latter had

30. McGrath 1995: xxviii.

31. Attwood 1996: xv.

32. Attwood 1996: xxiii.

33. See also Day 2001. In Day's overview, the themes of conquest, dispossession and race relations outweigh any other concern, and Aboriginal history becomes a paradigm for the whole interpretation of Australian history.

34. Attwood 1996: xxxvii.

35. Goodall 1996.

maintained traditional rights on their landholdings by accepting a system of 'double occupation' while, after the cessation of overt hostilities, most 'squatters stopped trying to exclude Aboriginal owners from their country, and Aboriginal communities reoccupied their lands as they took up work on their invaders' pastoral runs'.³⁶ Only later did the 'double occupation' eventually and progressively enter into crisis, as the development of towns, 'free selection', and economic downturns altered the need for black labour in pastoral runs. Attempts at renegotiation, either by the state directly or by European employers, missionary leaders, or town communities, had to face a surprisingly consistent, organised and resilient local resistance. According to Goodall, the double occupation had therefore been followed by a stage of enforced and strongly contested 'second dispossession', a phase which took place at different times in different areas and according to local needs and balances of power. In more remote regions, the terms of the double occupation were finally denounced only in the late 1960s.³⁷ Most importantly, Goodall's narrative challenges ameliorative narratives of Aboriginal history. She convincingly shows that 20th century white Australia was as much inclined to Aboriginal dispossession as its 19th century predecessor, while also confirming that land rights had a strong tradition of acknowledgment by Europeans – a tradition that was not established *ex novo* after Mabo.

Aboriginal autonomy was also the main subject of Tim Rowse's *White flour, white power* which introduced to the historiographical landscape of Australia what could be termed the 'rationing frontier'.³⁸ Rationing had historically been – at least until the transition from rations to cash in the 1960s and early 1970s – the most recurrent interaction between Aboriginal groups and pastoralists, missionaries, administrators and bureaucrats. Rowse notes how the implicit and explicit relationship between ration-provider and ration-user had consistently eluded historical and anthropological inquiry. His argument, identifying rationing as 'a pervasive institution of Central Australian colonialism', consists of an evaluation of rationing as a 'culturally undemanding' factor, one that could be accepted and practised by Indigenous recipients since it permitted them to 'preserve their own understanding of why they were rationed for'.³⁹ Contextualising the history of rationing in the wider history of assimilationist ideologies, Rowse assesses their ultimate failure against the resistance/persistence of Aboriginal understandings.

Rowse uses this comprehension of the inner workings of the donor-recipient relationship to explain the historical development of Aboriginal-white relations and the 'moral geography' of Alice Springs – a geography characterised primarily by its divisions along the town-bush boundary. The 'ideologies of donation' that informed rationing in its different phases had seen rationing as a first step towards assimilation, towards an overarching movement in the direction of the entitlements of a 'Central Australian citizenship' (the capacity to own a suburban house inside the civilised side of the boundary).⁴⁰ However, this strategy had been disempowered by Aboriginal understandings: since they perceived it as being 'no more than the passage of goods

36. Goodall 1996: 58.

37. See Goodall 1996: 104–114, 125–148.

38. Rowse 1998.

39. Rowse 1998: 4–5.

40. Rowse 1998: 2.

[and] requiring only the most minimal degree of intersubjective accord ... it was difficult for assimilationists to build a tutelary practice upon that relationship'.⁴¹ Rationing emerged then as another 'site' for Aboriginal resistance and survival, a site in which tribal agendas of preservation of autonomy and control of the black community could be reconciled with the need to seek an accommodation with the colonising presence. Moreover, the relationship characterising most of the interface between Aboriginal people and settlers did not allow the construction of a body of knowledge about the colonised, and the 'scientific party, the pastoral lease, the mission enclave, the police station, the welfare settlement' had been no exception in this context.⁴² By depriving the coloniser of effective means to gather knowledge, Aboriginal communities had effectively protected their autonomy.

These works are all united by the tendency towards uncovering Aboriginal resistance and resilience where it had not been sought before: after the period of open hostilities had ceased, and well after the moment in which open armed conflict had typically been concluded by an unwritten agreement between local Aboriginal people and pastoralists. These interpretations do not divide between an Aboriginal dispossession located in an irretrievable past and contemporary Aboriginal politics, or between 'colonial' and 'federal' histories. Anticipating a historiographical phase that was to come later, these works conflate the 19th and the 20th centuries and insinuate the notion that the search for a genocidal history may have to be carried out in a less linearly historicised discursive past.

Inga Clendinnen's *True stories* is also dedicated to this form of reassessment of the relationship between white and Aboriginal Australia.⁴³ Clendinnen's proposal is to abandon the term 'frontier' in order to interpret the complexities of that interface. She argues that the history of Aboriginal resistance cannot be positioned in either side of the rapidly moving line of settlement, and this should certainly cease to represent an interpretative divide between Aboriginal presence and Aboriginal destruction. Clendinnen proposes to situate Aboriginal resistance more accurately, while recognising that the intelligibility of Aboriginal actions is an interpretative problem still waiting to be approached satisfactorily. How to interpret a type of resistance that covers its tracks to the ultimate limit of intelligibility? Her answer is in Indigenous agency, which she refers to as 'sensibly flexible politics' or a 'strategy of incorporation'.⁴⁴ She demonstrates that a simplifying historiography cannot be applied to the history of Australia, especially to the history of its race relations. At the same time, Clendinnen's lectures represent a manifesto for historical research, a proposal for a further demise of the sterile opposition between 'black armband' history and settler style recitations. It is, again, a synthesis of two conflicting narrations:

Why concoct a single, simple, and therefore necessarily false tale and call it Australia's history? Why not a cornucopia of true stories, which would tell us what really happened? Why deny the courage of those early settlers? Why deny their cruelty when sheep were taken or a shepherd speared? Why deny the horror

41. Rowse 1998: 5.

42. Rowse 1998: 5.

43. Clendinnen 1999.

44. Clendinnen 1999: 49.

when they took their guns and hunted down black men, women and children, helplessly running to nowhere? ... I would recommend a crabwise approach, eyes swivelling sideways, backwards, forwards, with equal intensity, because while the past is past, it is not dead.⁴⁵

And, I would suggest further, in the case of Australian race relations, often the past does not even seem to be past.

Bringing home the *Bringing them home* report

The Mabo judgment was a turning point both in Australian historical debates and in public perceptions of the Aboriginal experience. As we have seen, the High Court in a sense gave a qualified juridical recognition to an already successful historiographical transformation which had made violent dispossession a central theme of Australian historical narratives. This acknowledgment brought an Australian revisionist historiography out of academia and into public policy, and, in turn, into collision with a consistent section of public opinion. Although this revisionist view has had to be defended in the public sphere, even those who oppose the theme of frontier violence do not challenge the principle that there was no Indigenous consent to the assertion of British sovereignty.⁴⁶ There remained, however, an unavoidable debate about the price that Aboriginal people have paid in being colonised, and the moral necessity of reparations. In this debate, the turning point was the *Bringing them home* report, which coalesced the voice of an Indigenous constituency of suffering – not so much the dispossessed, but the psychologically and morally shattered.⁴⁷

Aside from the financial burden associated with the prospect of compensation, acknowledging Aboriginal victimhood at this level, or, more than that, recognising white Australia as the victimiser of the Aboriginal 'other', has proven most frightening for a significant section of the public. A longing for a 'positive' narrative of Australian history is an established feature of an Australian consciousness, as illustrated for example by Ann Curthoys' appraisal of conservative historical discourse.⁴⁸ Considering this trait may help elucidate why it has been so difficult for Australian public opinion to accept a 'genocidal' assumption of recent historical scholarship and for the Howard administration to acknowledge the necessity of an apology. Indeed, redescribing one's intellectual state of mind from victimised to victimiser would necessitate a degree of courage and imagination that would be difficult to muster in today's Australian political and societal scene. The reason why a revisionist narrative of Australia's past is shared by only a minority of people outside academia may lie in the persistent power of a settler ideology. Overt support for meaningful native title and for Aboriginal sovereignty, for a Truth Commission on the stolen generations, or for the trial of Australian assimilationist policies, are instances that, in the context of a settler society and culture, cannot be legitimised or accepted as part of everyday knowledge. Accordingly, advocates of such notions, challenging what is admissible into the public realm, are assessed as ideologically or mentally ill. Recent attacks against the proponents of a genocidal dis-

45. Clendinnen 1999: 101–103.

46. See the autobiographical Reynolds 1999; Windschuttle 2000, 2002.

47. See National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their Families (Australia) 1997; Bird 1998.

48. Curthoys 1999: 1–19.

course as applied to Australian history in which interest in genocides is attributed to their Jewish background fit this intellectual framework.⁴⁹

In *An indelible stain?*, Henry Reynolds deals with the highly contentious topic of an Australian genocide while concentrating on a series of specific test cases, including the smallpox epidemic of 1789, the uprooting of Aboriginal Tasmanians, the 'dispersions' on the pastoral frontiers, and the assimilation paradigm. The work constitutes, in fact, a comprehensive if episodic overview of Aboriginal history.⁵⁰ Reynolds, however, developed a framework of analysis that departs from more traditional approaches to genocide studies and fully allows for the extreme localism of the Australian frontiers. Because of the specific characteristics of Aboriginal social systems – which typically comprised a small group linked to a particular country – Reynolds considers the resolve of settlers to destroy these small nations, whose land they had appropriated, to constitute what in genocidal proceedings is identified as deliberate intent. Reynolds thus elucidates a peculiar paradox of Australia's genocides, a feature frequently exploited by Australia's denialists: the smaller the group to be considered, the greater the likelihood that genocide did actually take place, and that most members of local groups were killed by settlers and by Aboriginal troopers.⁵¹ The more localised the struggle, the higher the probability that there was an intention to wipe local peoples out, and the lower the chances to properly document this. On Australian frontiers, genocide becomes more generalised yet less momentous; the numbers of each incident would have been quite small, and some of the perpetrators may sometimes have had little conscious idea of the genocidal nature of their actions. In the last analysis, Reynolds shows a process of Indigenous erasure and a deliberate intent – the two necessary prerequisites for a genocide to be recognised as such.

Reynolds's assessment of the 20th century history of the Aboriginal experience requires a different approach to the nature of cultural genocide as defined by Raphael Lemkin, the initiator of modern genocide studies.⁵² Whereas 'assimilation' is no longer an explicit part of Australia's political life, the intent to finally absorb the Indigenous people into 'the nation' and extinguish their separate autonomy remains strong. In this sense, Reynolds' analysis ultimately deals with the lack of a postcolonial passage, a passage his scholarship has been consistently advocating for decades. A local variation of genocide, therefore, not only stains Australia's past but also its present. Until Australia recognises Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders as distinct peoples through a systematic acceptance of customary law and self-government supported by regional agreements and a constitutional definition of Indigenous rights, to use Reynolds' concluding words, 'the long-heralded, often-anticipated disappearance of the Aborigines [as distinct peoples] may yet come to pass'.⁵³

Anna Haebich's *Broken circles* constitutes the first comprehensive account of the Aboriginal experience *vis a vis* the policy of forced child removal.⁵⁴ This history,

49. See Tatz 2001: 30; Ryan 2001.

50. Reynolds 2001.

51. See especially Windschuttle 2000, 2002; Evans & Thorpe 2001; Attwood & Foster 2003.

52. See Lemkin 1944; Curthoys and Docker 2001.

53. Reynolds 2001: 179.

54. Haebich 2000.

covering all Australian colonies, states, and territories, is all-inclusive, evaluating the earliest seizures of Aboriginal children as well as later policies of systematic removal and incarceration. *Broken circles*, however, is also a history of the resistance and achievements of Aboriginal attempts to defend their communities and family life. The strategic choice of covering the history of 19th century abductions and producing a comprehensive survey of state intrusion into Aboriginal family life highlights continuity (as Goodall's *Invasion to embassy* also does) and collapses 'colonial' and 'contemporary' histories. It also contributes to the timely repositioning of a debate that, by its nature, is better located in an historical dimension rather than a judicial arena. Indeed, *Broken circles* immediately became an essential tool of reference for people addressing these issues. It countered what amounted to a coordinated effort to dismiss the notion that a policy of widespread removal of Aboriginal children had ever occurred, or that the removal of children could be ascribed to a genocidal practice.

From the beginning of her work, Haebich interprets Aboriginal family life as the centre of an Aboriginal ideology. Despite recurring denials, its deliberate and regular disruption could not entail a purposeful attempt to erase an Aboriginal identity:

Overlapping circles of extended family lie at the heart of the lives of most Aboriginal Australians. Networks of family relationships determine day-to-day activities and shape the course of destinies. From an early age Aboriginal Australians learn who belongs to whom, where they come from and how they should behave across a wide variety of kin. These are highly valued and integral components of Aboriginal cultural knowledge.⁵⁵

By the same token, Haebich's detailed analysis of Aboriginal family life highlights outstanding persistence and resilience rather than fragility. This is ironic, since it was often a perceived collapse of family bonds that allegedly triggered a 'humanitarian' policy of forced removal. In this sense, *Broken circles* constitutes yet another example in the historiographical investigation of Aboriginal resistance and persistence. Ultimately, in Haebich's work, family life and Aboriginal struggles against governmental intrusion become a paradigm for the interpretation of the wider processes of Aboriginal contestation against white hegemony.

During 2001, most of the historiographical debate on the stolen generations and an Australian genocide coalesced around Robert Manne's essay, 'In denial: the stolen generations and the right', which argues convincingly that there had been a campaign to undermine the genocidal paradigm espoused in the *Bringing them home* report.⁵⁶ The report's recommendation for an apology and for a process of compensation had prompted a series of judicial disputes which have seen a number of court cases testing whether the Federal Government should be held liable for the suffering of Indigenous children under the policies of removal. The courts have so far refused to recognise Federal Government liability.

'In denial' is structured in two main parts. The first presents an outline of the dynamics of the debate, exemplified by the outburst of recrimination that followed Aboriginal spokesperson Lowitja O'Donoghue's admission in February 2001 that her

^{55.} Haebich 2000: 13.

^{56.} Manne 2001a. *Quarterly Essay's* format consists of monographic essays; a reprint of 'In denial' was successively published in 2002 promoting it as a 'national bestseller'.

white father may have handed her and her siblings to missionary authorities. The second, and major, part of Manne's essay documents a coordinated promotion of denial. The campaign, co-ordinated by Padraic McGuinness' editorship of *Quadrant* and covertly encouraged by the Federal Government, revolved around the notion that Indigenous children were 'rescued' rather than 'stolen'. Manne's debunking of such a campaign tends to move away from the judicial debate and back into historical understanding, ultimately repropounding the notion that only a frank acknowledgment of a genocidal history will initiate a process of healing (and that such an outcome is indeed preferable to a continuation of a national trauma).

The subsequent issue of the *Quarterly Essay* was the site of an interesting correspondence, where a number of critical responses by notable scholars contributed to a discussion on the issues raised by Manne's essay.⁵⁷ These critiques especially insisted on several elements: one was a reductionist argument, epitomised by the suspicion that the numbers of children removed is more likely to be around 25,000 than 100,000 (as the *Bringing them home* report had originally implied); another recurring theme in these responses was an emphasis on the repeated loss of recent court cases concerning the stolen generations by Aboriginal claimants, and the finding by the judicial system that the Commonwealth Government was not responsible for the suffering of the applicants.

On the other hand, influenced by her recent Holocaust studies, Clendinnen's response reiterated a refusal to utilise a genocidal terminology and represented a historiographical challenge to Manne's denunciation of denialism.⁵⁸ Clendinnen's interpretation of the practice of child removal did not recognise its genocidal character and distinguished between 'genocide' and 'brutality'. However, the controversy between Manne and Clendinnen was one of characterisation and contexts: whereas Manne thought that an intention to 'breed out the colour' (and extinguish a specific group's autonomy) also qualified for the description of genocide, Clendinnen interpreted this term in a narrower sense and as a synonym for the Shoah. Nouns, however, often acquire a different value in different intellectual circumstances, and in North America, for example, the term 'holocaust', let alone 'genocide', enjoys a wide currency in colonial studies.⁵⁹

Despite their terminological divergence, Clendinnen's discussion of the tension between intention and outcome, and the idea that good people can do terrible things, may be ultimately supportive of Manne's conception of denial. He concludes that 'almost no-one was able to see through the kind of racism which could make it seem that tearing Aboriginal children from their mothers and communities was a natural, even noble act'.⁶⁰ Manne is optimistic in his use of the past tense. And yet this may be somewhat premature: the campaigns of denial concerning frontier casualties and the stolen generations, and their reception, show how many advocates of an Australian settler consciousness are not yet ready to see through that same racism.⁶¹

57. See correspondence of Brunton, Clendinnen, Duffy, Moran 2001: 88–114; Manne 2001b: 115–130; Schaffer 2001.

58. In their denunciation of *Quadrant's* denialist campaign, Evans and Thorpe have also expressed their unease in using 'genocide' as a word capable of conveying the reality of Australian Aboriginal history, and opted for 'indigenocide' instead (Evans and Thorpe 2001: 33–39).

59. See, for example, Stannard 1993; Davis 2002.

60. Manne 2001a: 93.

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⁶¹. See Howson 1999.

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