

Looking forward to hosting you, amigo – and, yes, we won't run out of red!¹

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I am pretty sure that it was anthropologist Chris Houston who introduced me to Patrick Wolfe's *Settler Colonialism and the Transformation of Anthropology*² not long after it was published. At least that is the recollection of my partner Melinda Hinkson and she is usually correct on such matters. It was the book that introduced me to Patrick's theory of settler colonialism and his oeuvre and which fundamentally altered my way of thinking about territoriality, property rights, political jurisdiction and postcolonial possibilities in Australia and other settler states. Patrick is without doubt the Australian intellectual who has had the most profound impact on my theoretical thinking in the last decade or so; his radical framework helped me make some sense of what was unfolding here: invasion not as history, but as an ongoing and very contemporary process with the overarching project the elimination of native societies through 'advancement to integration'. Patrick's materialist and structural theorisation of the settler project of destruction aligned with my empirical observations in remote Indigenous Australia. This was especially so in the aftermath of the Northern Territory Intervention and state attempts to recolonise spaces that had almost accidentally become domains that were too Indigenous for Australia's political and bureaucratic elites to tolerate after the early twenty-first-century-purported 'end of history'³ and the neoliberal turn.

1 Patrick Wolfe to Jon Altman, email correspondence, 16 February 2013.

2 Wolfe 1999.

3 Fukuyama 1992.

In an email from Patrick dated 15 July 2013 with the subject line 'There's no such thing as a throwaway line' he alerted me to his use in a publication of a verbal comment that I had made when co-launching an exhibition by Garawa artist Jacky Green.⁴ With characteristic humour he emailed 'I hope you like the acknowledgement!' and signed off 'As ever, Patrick'. And there in endnote 35 with his wonderful informality, deliberately flaunting academic convention: 'Personal communication. Thank you, Jon'. Patrick was my sort of intellectual, at once hyper-scholastic, but also highly personal and not at all self-important. I made numerous references to Patrick's publications in my writings, but I regret missing the opportunity to just say 'Thank you, Patrick', one of two deep regrets in our sadly truncated friendship that I now seek to belatedly rectify. More on the other regret later.

I met Patrick, incredibly, on the same day that I met Malcolm Brough.

From its launch date of 21 June 2007, I had been highly critical of the Northern Territory Intervention and of political leaders John Howard and Malcolm Brough for their racist vilification of Indigenous Australians under the protective umbrella of parliamentary privilege. The now defunct Bennelong Society had its annual conference in Melbourne, at the Windsor Hotel on 19–20 June 2008, provocatively timed, it seemed to me, to coincide with the first anniversary of the Intervention; and provocatively titled 'The NT Emergency Response: Appraisal and Future'. And so, visiting Melbourne, I decided to register and attend for a day to see if I could glean any sense of conservative self-assessments, maybe even find some reflexivity. I was deeply disappointed.

It was on that day coincidentally that it was announced that Brough as Minister for Indigenous Affairs was to be awarded the Bennelong Medal with the citation: 'for bringing hope to the women and children living in remote Aboriginal communities, for a future free from violence and appalling abuse'.⁵ I am not sure that recent revelations at Don Dale Detention Centre in what *The Economist* weekly dubbed 'Australia's Abu Ghraib'⁶ reflect Brough, architect of the Intervention, as a worthy winner even by the norms of his peers.

As I left the venue I ran into Brough. I had raised a few issues, when allowed, during the day and so he knew who I was and was aware of my published views. But that did not stop him from shaking my hand. I in turn congratulated him on his medal and diplomatically apologised for missing the evening medal presentation dinner; I explained I had a prior commitment at Brunswick Bound,

4 Reference in an introductory article: Wolfe 2013.

5 Wikipedia, 'Bennelong Society', en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bennelong_Society (accessed 10 August 2016).

6 'Australia's Abu Ghraib', *The Economist*, 30 July 2016, www.economist.com/news/asia/21702807-abuses-juvenile-prison-prompt-national-inquiry-australias-abu-ghraib (accessed 10 August 2016).

an independent bookshop on Sydney Road, where I was to launch the latest issue of *Arena Journal* with its own special focus on 'Indigenous Futures: After the Intervention'.⁷

It was at Brunswick Bound and at the subsequent dinner when we sat together that I first met and engaged with Patrick.⁸ My launch speech, from what I recall, was a somewhat breathless account of the paternalistic and strongly assimilationist views held by those powerful people at the Windsor and a plea to the Arena group, with whom I was and remain closely affiliated, to critically engage with such views. Arena of course had earlier commissioned and published the collection *Coercive Reconciliation: Stabilise, Normalise, Exit Aboriginal Australia* as a rapid political response to the Intervention in the lead-up to the 2007 election when both Howard and Brough lost their seats. And later on it published a landmark volume *Stolen Lands, Broken Cultures: The Settler Colonial Present*,⁹ deeply influenced by Patrick's theorisations and that ended with an essay by Patrick: 'New Jews for Old: Settler State Formation and the Impossibility of Zionism'.

At the launch, Patrick introduced himself very warmly, I think with one of those almost de rigueur inner-Melbourne man hugs. We were pretty familiar with each other's work and political positions; and I was sympathetic to his critical challenge to my discipline of anthropology to reflect on its role in the colonial project. Patrick was a critic of the establishment, which for me enhanced his standing. Indeed, I took an instant liking to Patrick, which is always a great relief when you especially like someone's published scholarship: liking the author as an empathetic human being so enhances the appeal of their work. Patrick was deeply and genuinely engaged both with his own life project and with those of others.

That first meeting formed the basis for an abiding connection around the twin and related questions of brutal dispossession in Australia and Israel, where I happen to have been born. Afterwards he sent me a now-treasured hardcopy offprint of his seminal 'Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native'¹⁰ with the scrawled inscription: 'Jon – Good to meet you. Good to have started talking. This is a more recent extension of the approach. Hope you like it. Looking forward to catching up for a proper talk in Canberra. Best wishes, Patrick.'

7 *Arena Journal*, New Series, no. 29/30, 2008.

8 I had further meetings with Patrick, one with Malcolm was enough.

9 *Arena Journal*, New Series, no. 37/38, 2012.

10 Wolfe 2006.

We never did that, but we did enjoy a blossoming email relationship after our first meeting: it was very yin/yang, his views historical, theoretical and abstracted, mine anthropological, empirical and grounded: there was interconnectedness between these apparent opposites that worked very productively for us. From what I recall, we only met a few times; we did badly in overcoming the 'tyranny of distance' between Canberra and Healesville.

One memorable occasion was more than four years later on 11 October 2012 at what was then BMW Edge, now Deakin Edge, in Federation Square at the launch of a book *People on Country, Vital Landscapes, Indigenous Futures*,¹¹ the culmination of a five-year project with seven ranger groups in the Northern Territory and New South Wales who were actively participating in a 'caring for country' social movement. Patrick was vitally engaged by the project and the activism of the participating rangers with whom he enthusiastically interacted, and he was highly appreciative of the vast geographic and cultural distance the Aboriginal rangers had travelled to participate in this event. Patrick was particularly captivated by Jack Green, a senior Garawa man from the southern Gulf of Carpentaria, who has been involved in land rights and conservation issues for over 30 years in the Northern Territory and Queensland. In an email the very next day¹² Patrick expressed his approval of 'people on country' that challenged the project of elimination through the assertion of environmental and political jurisdiction: where people occupied and cared for their country in accord with custom despite settler societies' efforts to clear them off their country, especially in the Gulf, where frontier violence was known regionally as 'the killing time'.

In that same email he lamented having left his copy of *People on Country* at some Indian restaurant in the city where he had gone for dinner after the event. We speculated in email exchanges about who might have found the book and what they might have made of it. But then Patrick remembered the name of the restaurant, Flora Indian Restaurant, emailed from Healesville and informed me, delighted, that they had found and were holding the book for him to collect: 'my dinner there's gone back down from \$37.00 to the \$7.00 I thought it was costing me! (not bad for an excellent masala dosa, hey?). Pity about the missed random inspiration. Oh well'.¹³

11 Altman and Kerins 2012.

12 Patrick Wolfe to Jon Altman, email correspondence, 12 October 2012.

13 Patrick Wolfe to Jon Altman, email correspondence, 13 October 2012.

We next met at the Arena Project Space in Fitzroy on 14 February 2013 when Jacky Green had his first solo art show, 'Flow of Voices: Paintings from the Gulf of Carpentaria'. On this occasion Jack was resisting elimination with his highly political figurative art: 'I want the government and the mining companies to know that we are still here. We aren't going anywhere. We aren't dead yet. We are still here, feeling the country.'¹⁴ The exhibition was opened a little unconventionally by the artist, Sean Kerins and me.¹⁵

Patrick was captivated by the occasion (see Figure 1).

As soon as the speeches concluded Patrick grabbed me. He was moved and emotional, and was adamant that he wanted to purchase the painting *Four Clan Groups*, a very busy painting with a complex story (see Figure 2).¹⁶

Patrick had lost his home near Healesville and most of his possessions in the Black Saturday bushfires of February 2009; he was impoverished. And yet he was the first on the night to make what was for him a major financial commitment. It was a painting, he confided to me, that he was keen to have for his to-be-built new home on his block high up on Lowes Road near Healesville. His brother Mike informs me that the painting never got a permanent home at the new house as Patrick was still waiting for decorators before hanging the art. 'It leaned instead on top of the wardrobe in the room in which I slept', Mike told me, 'I like it very much'.¹⁷

¹⁴ Artist statement on exhibition invitation.

¹⁵ Elsewhere Sean Kerins talks of Jacky Green challenging conspiracies of silence with his art and draws on Patrick's 'The Settler Complex' – see Kerins 2013.

¹⁶ As related by Jack Green to Sean Kerins: 'These are the four clan or language groups around Borroloola. On the left in white and black at the top are the Yanyuwa. To the right of them are the Mara. Underneath in yellow and black are Gudanji, with Garawa on the right in black and white. While we are four different groups we are all related through ceremony, culture, land and marriage. The circle represents the ceremony that ties us together. The boat in the centre represents a prau that the Macassans used to sail from Indonesia to the Gulf of Carpentaria. My great-grandfather saw one of these and he went and painted it on his country at a cave at Spring Creek. The Macassans are part of our history; they came long before white people. We traded with them. In the box at the top of the painting are three groups of people. On the left are Aboriginal people wondering what's going on. In the middle are pastoralists. On the right are government people. This represents us as separate groups, not working together. On the right are four boxes. At the top is a government man. The man with white hair represents the boss of the mine, not caring about what happens to our country. Below him are miners. At the bottom are two miners standing in front of some rock art. They don't care about the rock art or our sacred sites. They go looking for them, taking pictures, or they ignore them when the mines go in'. Sean Kerins to Jon Altman, email correspondence, 9 August 2016.

¹⁷ Mike Wolfe to Jon Altman, email correspondence, 9 August 2016.



Figure 1: The launch of 'Flow of Voices', with Patrick Wolfe at left.

Source: Courtesy of Jessie Boylan.



Figure 2: *Four Clan Groups* on Jack Green's immediate right.

Source: Courtesy of Jessie Boylan, with permission from Jack Green.

The years slipped by. My second regret is that I never took up Patrick's standing invitation to visit him at his new house just to chat or talk about his new and powerful comparative magnum opus *Traces of History*¹⁸ summarising decades of research. This was especially the case because Melinda and I visited Healesville and the Coranderrk cemetery on 1 January 2016 and had considered an impromptu drop-in. Tragically, by the time I visited Patrick's home for the first time two months later he was no longer with us; it was for his funeral.

I drank some red wine on the verandah that day overlooking Healesville where he wrote much of *Traces of History*. And I thought about his writings and the terrible things that were done at Coranderrk. Patrick notes in his book how he came across the descendants of these people in Healesville: 'They are in our town but not of it. They are of Wurundjeri country, which I am in, but not of.' Aunty Joy Murphy Wandin told us, in a moving tribute of Patrick as a dear friend of the Wurundjeri people, how her people welcome his ashes which are now buried on Wurundjeri country on the eastern border of his property in accordance with his wishes. He is now both in and of Wurundjeri country, an honour fittingly bestowed on someone who not only believed that histories should be written responsibly, but actually did so with grim determination.¹⁹

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¹⁸ Wolfe 2016.

¹⁹ This paragraph draws on *Traces of History*, p. 45.

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