

Patrick Wolfe

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Patrick's loss is for so many of us a loss of a friend as well as a colleague and a scholar. I first met Patrick at the beginning of 2008. We had both just taken up fellowships in History at La Trobe University. I was returning to where I had completed my doctorate, and so at the first staff meeting of the year was surrounded by many familiar faces. But as we waited for the meeting to begin this very energetic man, who I had only seen at a staff seminar a short time before, was circulating the chairs around the table and introducing himself. When he came to me and we swapped names, there was recognition on both sides, which was surprising. I, of course, knew Patrick's *Settler Colonialism* but had never had any contact with him, so a well-known name was suddenly given form but I was surprised when he said, 'We have to talk soon'. It was a mark of Patrick's style to not wait for a round table introduction in which names can lose their connections to faces and interests almost immediately, but to move around the chairs to *engage* in an introduction. And we did talk several times over that year. Our interests overlapped: the history of how ideas worked in society, particularly ideas of race and concepts of humanity, focused in the settler colonial sphere.

There were things in common that drew me to Patrick aside of the themes of our scholarship. We had both come to academia late, and after a life of a variety of activity, and we both had chosen to live on rural properties after long attachments to inner-city living – and to a certain extent old-style bohemian inner-city living. It was this move to the country – he to forest outside Healesville and me to pasture country in central Victoria – which led to a closer bond for us. On 7 February 2009 – Black Saturday – we both lost our houses to the fires, evidence of how widespread the fires were. Patrick called me on the Sunday morning having heard of my loss and to tell me of his. It was a very emotional

mutual commiseration. The houses we had both loved were now piles of ash and twisted metal. We had never visited each other's houses before Black Saturday. But now we visited each other at the sites of our erstwhile houses, cleared then to bare earth. Although I did contemplate moving at various stages, it could never happen. Patrick knew this better than me. The fire had sharpened and strengthened our sense of belonging. I think we both felt that to not rebuild would betray place, would be to turn our backs on its reality, and our reality (although we both knew that our financial uncertainty might mean we had no choice at some point). He was living in rented accommodation and I in a shed on my land. As our building proceeded and we both struggled to get our life as scholars and writers back on track, we became aware of how much rebuilding related to ourselves as historians whose major focus was the settler colonial. There was no walking away from fire any more than there was walking away from the troubled settler legacy. Both fire and history confronted us with the Indigenous reality of our places. It was for this reason I decided I needed to take a scholastic detour into looking at my experience of fire in the context of the human relationship, to fire on this continent and elsewhere. This 'Fire Book', as I called it, was encouraged by Patrick from the start, a means to ground my recovery. I think similarly of the Coranderrk passages in Patrick's *Traces of History*, although I do not know if they were written before or after February 2009, whether on the balcony of his old house or his new house. If before, I am sure they were revisited and deepened on the balcony of the new house. *Traces of History* is a major testament, part of a burst of creative and intellectual energy that seemed to parallel the building of his beautiful new house. That the book and the house should have come to fruition at the same time is no accident, that this should have been so shortly before his too early death is a tragedy that leaves us with a gaping personal and intellectual absence. Like so many I value the conversations we had and will not stop missing the conversations I meant to have.

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