

# ***Breaking the Silence: Aboriginal Defenders and the Settler State, 1905–1939***

by Alison Holland

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There are certain touchstone moments that serve as a shorthand to demarcate one period from another. One such moment is W. E. H. Stanner's 1968 Boyer Lecture in which he criticised settler Australia's 'cult of forgetfulness' with relation to Aboriginal history.

Alison Holland sets out to dispel the historical myth that Stanner's lecture marked the beginning of a self-critical public discourse on colonialism in Australia. Over the course of *Breaking the Silence*, her second monograph, she thoroughly and systematically reveals that, from the beginning of the twentieth century until the Second World War, Aboriginal and settler Australians alike inhabited a zeitgeist of constant and 'deafening' dialogue between administrators, who sought to govern Aboriginal lives, and the diverse and myriad Australians who spoke up in defence of Aboriginal interests as they saw them.

Indeed, Holland's project contextualises Stanner's claims about the 'cult of forgetfulness', pointing out that he was talking specifically about history books and that Stanner himself had been a vocal 'defender', as she terms people who spoke up in favour of Aboriginal people's rights in the four decades after Federation.

At the book's opening, the reader is presented with two vignettes and one proposition; the two stories detail parallel, life-saving acts of heroism, conducted 25 years apart by two Aboriginal men in the Northern Territory. While the first was publicly celebrated by the Commonwealth, the second was largely ignored. Holland's proposition is that a heroic act in 1912 could earn an Alawa man named Mallyalega an Albert Medal for saving the life of a white policeman, while the 1937 rescue of an

Aboriginal boy with leprosy by Kancubina went unrecognised by the settler state. Holland asserts that this was because the pendulum of opinion in government had swung to the disadvantage of Aboriginal people in the intervening period, though she mentions in passing that it may also reflect the difference in the value placed on the life of a white policeman and that of an Aboriginal boy with leprosy.

The first three chapters detail the emergence of many settler Australians' vocal opposition to the widespread exploitation and dispossession of Aboriginal people. The Roth report in 1905, and many others in the decades since, stimulated various settler Australian movements to establish land reserves for Aboriginal people.

The next three chapters explore the activism of white feminists, like Olive Pink and Mary Bennett, in their campaigns to protect the bodily autonomy of Aboriginal women, exercise 'maternalist' power over light-skinned Aboriginal children and install white women as Protectors of Aborigines. These campaigns generally failed, but efforts to stop police from being able to compel Aboriginal wives to testify against their husbands struck a chord with administrators and were successful.

The seventh chapter discusses the crescendo of debate between administrators and defenders in the late 1930s, before the Second World War brought an end to this fraught and conflicted era.

The final chapter attends to the activism of some Aboriginal people in the interwar period, especially William Cooper and William Ferguson. It concludes by pointing out that William Cooper 'died in despair', with most of the aims of Aboriginal defenders yet to be accomplished.

In this final chapter, Holland provides greater detail regarding the conditions experienced by Aboriginal people and its placement at this stage does produce a significant impact.

Holland makes sense of the deafening cacophony, often misguided and always louder than it was effective, around improving Aboriginal people's lives. As such, *Breaking the Silence* can be read as a corrective against the belief that speaking out from the 1960s onwards broke from the past and signified, even constituted, some kind of emancipation from an ignorant colonial condition. In fact, ongoing repression has managed to coexist with a constant flow of speech, since at least Federation.

Reading the past with a hermeneutic generosity that is uncharacteristic in this field, Holland makes this history feel much closer than it has. Throughout the book, she embraces the complexity of controversial figures and their views and aims. She effectively summons this past into our present, notably when inviting parallels with the explosion of public discourse during the Reconciliation movement of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

At the same time, Holland's decision to favour a style of thick description sometimes comes at the expense of being able to reduce her arguments down to clearer and more powerful analyses. Chapters 4–6 are the clear exceptions, where she combines her rigorous historical scholarship and depth of research with a critique of white feminist advocates' maternalism, as well as the patriarchal and colonial structures against which they struggled. Had more chapters hung together in this way, through the authorial assertion of a deeper principle at play than the fact of being incited to speech, then a more profound analysis might have been arrived at.

Ultimately, however, this book achieves its aim. It reveals a 'cacophony' of settler and Aboriginal Australian advocacy in the first four decades of the twentieth century – and it stands as a complex repository of discourse defending Aboriginal people. Replacing the common but lazy touchstone of a presumptive silence and a 'cult of forgetfulness' before Stanner's 1968 lecture, *Breaking the Silence* poses a new set of questions for future scholarship of this period, including how and why so much goodwill and public discourse could have so thoroughly receded from view and left so little meaningful residue in concrete political gains.

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