

## **Part I. Preface, Introduction and Historical Overview**



## Preface

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This book jumps into the arena to 'bulldog' a deceptively simple idea. *Dislocating the frontier* goes beyond images of a progressive or disastrous frontier to rethink the frontier imagination itself. In re-imagining the frontier in Australia, we do not discount Aboriginal dispossession. Nor are we enjoined in a critique of colonialism, or a critique of a critique of colonialism. Confronted by the complexity of Aboriginal-Settler encounters and their long, entwined histories, we offer interpretative analysis that acknowledges resistance and indigenous autonomy as well as contingencies, contentions and complexities. As a mythic arena, the frontier is a site of violence, replacement and nation-building. And yet, this book shows that it is also a site of productive assertions of dilemmas, and of unexpected engagements toward change. It is, thus, a continuing site of cultural action. And as a number of authors to this volume advert, in some parts of Australia a post-colonial frontier is emerging that jostles and upsets the classical frontier imagination without, as yet, seeking to bury it.

This book began in September 1999 in Darwin. The geographic and mythic significance of North Australia as frontier territory has long been acknowledged; we believed that a located conference would draw on both the setting and the weight of history to enhance the vitality of the contributions. The conference and this collection acknowledge the frontier to be conceptually pervasive and elusive, as well as being provocatively catalytic. These essays show that a critical and comparative approach to analysing the frontier is an essential part of decolonising thought. Collectively, the essays reveal diverse aspects of the frontier; in representation, performance, society and politics. Individually and collectively, the contributing writers set out to chart meanings and experiences of the frontier in their contemporary multivalent complexity.

In 1999 we understood these issues to be part of an expanding discourse on the frontier, in the mode that Furniss discusses so eloquently in Chapter 2. Since then, however, Australian public life has been captured by a debate over the meaning of history and historical method, the meaning of the frontier, and the meaning of conflict. Labelled 'history wars' this debate has clarified a conservative position that seeks to reconfigure analysis of the frontier by framing it in terms of how history is told and confining it to the past and to zones of conflict (for example, see Windschuttle 2002, Manne 2003, Macintyre 2003, Attwood and Foster 2003, Attwood 2005). The history wars are on-going. Attwood's recent (2005) work contextualises the debates and addresses the main issues in a profoundly scholarly and yet accessible way.

*Dislocating the frontier* stakes out a position that both speaks to, and refuses to be bound by, the terms of the current debates about the frontier. The history wars have shown a narrowing of focus: the frontier has been reduced from a zone of encounter and interaction to a zone of conflict; conflict has been reduced to killing; killing has been reduced to deliberate gunshots; body counts have become a measure of violence. In the process, historians have been stereotyped as people who seek to promote accounts of the past that focus on particular types of conflict and particular levels of body counts. Attwood (2005:191) reminds us that in debates about the past it is not only the past that is at stake:

In the final analysis, it is not a conflict about the past .... but a conflict over the past in the present. More particularly, it is a conflict regarding the moral relationship of settler peoples to this history – to this relationship between past and present, present and past.

To the extent that the debate reduces the terms of engagement, to that extent it reduces the possibilities for understanding the complexities of the past and of the past in the present. These reductions impair our capacity to imagine the future as well as to engage fully with the present and the past.

*Dislocating the frontier* is provocatively multi-vocal when read in light of the history wars. In our emphasis on contemporary complexity, the authors implicitly argue for a multitude of types of interactions that are on-going. These essays allow the intricacies of real life to take precedence over the singularities that have come to dominate the history wars. They seek to examine and celebrate subtlety and complexity in an arena that is in danger of being turned into a shadow zone of caricature and stereotype.

We acknowledge the Co-operative Research Centre for the Sustainable Development of Tropical Savannas at the Northern Territory University which provided the main funding for the conference. The Northern Territory Museum hosted the event; the Aboriginal Areas Protection Authority supported the travel of some speakers, and staff of the North Australia Research Unit of the Australian National University helped in the organisation. ANU E-Press staff have been a delight to work with, and we gratefully acknowledge their dedication to the embattled project of scholarly publication.

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# 1. Introduction: transforming the frontier in contemporary Australia

**Richard Davis**

The frontier is one of the most pervasive, evocative tropes underlying the production of national identity in Australia. Although frequently used in various contexts, it is rarely defined, suggesting that as an idea it gains its strength and dynamism by virtue of ease of use and great flexibility of application. As an interpretation of indigenous-settler historical relations it is used across the spectrum of encounter, from race wars, conquest and imperialism, to less violent but no less consequential inter-cultural crossings between indigenous Australians and settler-colonists. In terms of scientific or intellectual endeavours the frontier evokes the edges of possibility, beyond which glimpses of new and exciting prospects can be seen. Indeed, it is the real and imaginative spaces where edges and borders between ideas are traversed, where identities can lose their certainty and be reassembled, and where power fluctuates between people and the world, that the frontier trope attempts to secure. Further, while the frontier trope carries not only the freight of historical encounters, it also reveals the postures of nationhood that inform inter-cultural relationships and that shape institutions and ideas. To take only one instance, the debate in Australia over the last 25 years over the nature of the violence that characterised early relationships between Aboriginal people and settler-colonists is most often conducted around the veracity of estimates of Aborigines killed in frontier conflict with settler-colonists, the benign or malevolent intentions of the killers and other factual evidence that supports or denies the various claims.<sup>1</sup> These are not simply matters of fact, however; the arguments are waged as part of a larger public concern about race relations and the use of history in shaping a national identity that strives for a confident wholeness or is expressive of more contingent, contested, mobile processes. Nevertheless, the unquestioned status of the frontier invites interrogation: why has such an omnipresent idea slipped unreflexively into discussions of nationhood, history and identity? This volume brings together leading scholars and activists to examine the discursive strategies with which the frontier concept is made to be intellectually productive in Australia.

<sup>1</sup> B. Attwood, *Telling the Truth about Aboriginal History*; B. Attwood and S. G. Foster, *Frontier Conflict: The Australian Experience*; I. Macintyre, *The History Wars*; R. Manne, *Whitewash: On Keith Windschuttle's Fabricaiton of Aboriginal History*; K. Windschuttle, *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History*; B. W. Smith, *The Spectre of Truganinni*; H. Reynolds, *The Other Side of the Frontier*; K. Windschuttle, 'The Myths of Frontier Massacres in Australian History'; G. Blainey, *The Tyranny of Distance: How Distance Shaped Australia's History*; R. Milliss, *Waterloo Creek*.

## The genuine frontier

On February 23, 2000 the Mangarrayi people were handed the title deeds to Elsey Station, a Northern Territory cattle station immortalised in Jeannie Gunn's autobiographical novel *We of the Never-Never* (1907). Widely read by many generations of Australians, Gunn's novel has played an influential part in establishing the outback and its special privations as a critical cultural interlocutor in the development of national consciousness. Gunn wrote of struggles against economic hardship, Aboriginal cattle spearing, environmental capriciousness and social isolation as part of the process of colonists domesticating themselves to the Australian continent. For many Australian readers in the first half of the 20th century, her written experiences personalised the ideological process of settlement by bringing elements of a distant frontier into the realm of daily life to an encompassing, ordinary language of settlement.

*We of the Never-Never* was not intended to establish a definitive account of Australian settlement but it came to encapsulate that process as a relatively undifferentiated and uncomplicated myth of the psychological and moral accommodations needed to establish European ownership of the country and displacement of Aborigines. Much has been said about Gunn's original description of the murder of local Aborigines and subsequent sanitisation of this violence in later publications of the book where the description of the killings was removed. A film interpretation of the book, released in 1982, continued this elision, further cementing the virtuous elements of struggle with the land in the popular imagination.<sup>2</sup> Through these works Elsey Station became mobilised as a key sign of settlement in the theatre of Australian cultural history, while the Mangarrayi continued to be displaced and unrecognised as the original and enduring owners to that country. In a very modern evocation of the enduring iconicity of Elsey Station the local radio station – Radio Never Never – claimed the region to be the genuine frontier, the place in which specific events embodied broader process of invasion, settlement and displacement across the nation. At that 'genuine frontier' on February 23, a reversal occurred and a series of new questions was posed about the apparatuses of colonialism and the frontier. If the monolithic discourse of Australian history is motivated by the displacement of Aboriginal people and the establishment of settlers as the natural occupants of the land, to what extent has this process rested on an inscrutability that submerged dialogue, exchange and encounter by presuming their cataclysmic proportions?

This collection starts with the assumption that while the classical Australian frontier tends to be located in the imaginative fertility of the outback and is to be characterised by racial conflict, a more problematic and challenging frontier

<sup>2</sup> Auzins, *We of the Never Never*, 1982.



embraces a greater set of relationships than appropriation, and deals with more diverse circumstances than violence. Our aim is to move beyond the consensus that the frontier is a recognisable tale of woeful cross-cultural encounters. In our rejection of the tendency to homogenise the frontier as a single process we recognise the corresponding homogeneities implied by the discursive entities of settler, Aborigine and indigenous. We therefore address frontier encounters as having the simultaneous features of exchange, perpetuation, transformation, reclamation and a greater sense of the limit of colonising influences than resistance, capture, seizure and violence entails. We also recognise that the radically asymmetrical relations of power that have historically operated between settlers and Aborigines have tended to suppress differences within settler and Aboriginal peoples. Debate about Australian frontiers has not always recognised that the pervasive effects of encounter have sometimes been curtailed by autonomous indigenous spaces beyond frontier history. This point is eloquently expressed by Stephen Muecke in Chapter 10 in his discussion of Boxer's ability to enact an indigenous power based on an autonomous cultural geography that made contact with settlers discontinuous, fleeting and sometimes irrelevant in a period when the apparatuses of colonialism in the Kimberley exerted an abiding influence on indigenous lives.

*Dislocating the frontier* does not take as its place of departure a specific event or work that could be said to inaugurate the frontier as a distinctive process or idea. The essays that are collected here suggest continually occurring scenes of encounter wherein frontier is a conception of history and sociality that incorporates and moves beyond the assumption that history is a progressive embracement of modernity. The plurality of frontiers underlines the sense that it is a conception that rests on predicaments occasioned by difference and return, notions that are suggestively allied to evocations of nationhood. In Frederick Jackson Turner's celebratory historiographical interpretation of the establishment of the American nation, he concluded that by 1890 the process of frontier settlement across the north American continent had ended.<sup>3</sup> Frontier was, for Turner, variously assembled: it was 'the history of the colonization of the Great West ... an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement'; the encounter of hierarchically ordered social groups in which European immigrants were characterised as more socially complex and more able than indigenous inhabitants; a line of development distinguishing the energetic New World from the declining Old World of Europe; the accomplishment of civil society. History breaks in Turner's historiography, little is left to the intervention of the past into the future, rather, the explanation of 'national origins and national character by reference to the ever-present frontier

<sup>3</sup> F. Turner, 1893.

of colonization' is imagined as a unique process occasioned by the influence of specific environments and the peculiarities of settlement.<sup>4</sup>

Much has been said about the ethnocentric, masculinist, nationalist biases in Turner's frontier hypothesis and in this volume, Elizabeth Furniss charts the criticisms and debates that have occasioned the rejection and rehabilitation of frontier concepts in recent North American scholarship. Feminist writers have argued for a more explicit focus on gender in frontier analyses noting that the dominant place of white men in frontiers around the country has tended to marginalise women, Aborigines and ethnic minorities, exposing the frontier concept as a vital component in the determination of ideals of gender relations and family structures in settler society. It is important to note how Turner's hypothesis about settler expansion and environmental influences on individual, social and civil development found its way into Australian literature and scholarship. Turner's clear, untangled narrative of the material and cultural aspects of American settlement had the compelling features of all good (nationalist) myths: the delivery of powerful stories that draw on familiar symbols with economy and resonance that can be interpreted and elaborated in diverse contexts without the loss of simple, dramatic, narrative elements. While Turner was primarily concerned to account for American ideals, he was convinced his ideas were more ecumenical than national. His short list of frontier countries included Australia, and his work inspired others to search for evidence of similar virtues and civil developments in their own national settings.<sup>5</sup>

Certainly the most influential interpretation of Turner in an Australian context is found in Russel Ward's, *The Australian Legend*. In this work Turner's emphasis on environment as a shaper of personal and national temperament is interpreted by Ward to account for the emergence of a 'different kind of man', a 'typical Australian' forged by 'the outback ethos', transformed from morally diminished convicts into a 'morally improved "bushmen"' by 'the brute facts of Australian geography'. Ward embraced Turner's combination of anti-imperial sentiments, characterisation of settlement as a process of opportunistically entering areas of 'free' land and the moral sovereignty granted by confrontation with Aborigines and environment as a process of the domestication of settlers. Ian McLean recognises that the employment of the Turnerian model by Ward was premised on the eradication of Aborigines, ideologically catered for by establishing the heritage of distinctive Australian characteristics borne of bush living and encounter.<sup>6</sup> McLean considers this process of settler domestication to have

<sup>4</sup> Bassin, 'Turner, Solov'ev, and the "Frontier Hypothesis"', p. 474.

<sup>5</sup> Webb, *The Great Frontier*; Winks, 'Australia, the Frontier, and the Tyranny of Distance'; W. T. Jackson, 'Australians and the Comparative Frontier'; Jull, *The Politics of Northern Frontiers in Australia, Canada, and other 'First World' Countries*; Allen, *Bush and Backwoods*, p. 59. Sharp, 'Three Frontiers'.

<sup>6</sup> Ward, *The Australian Legend*, p. 286.

produced a melancholic aesthetic informing much early colonial art.<sup>7</sup> In Peter Brunt's assessment of McLean's argument he registers his unease that racial violence should inevitably assume a central place in the foundational myths of settler nations such as Australia.<sup>8</sup> There is more, though, to be said about the complex and deeply embedded place of violence in the ideological field generated by the frontier.

Where it provides a confident and authoritative account of settlements, frontier discourse creates the conditions for the forgetting of original violences. This process of forgetting is more apparent than real though as the 'hidden histories' of violent encounter constantly haunt settlement.<sup>9</sup> At those moments that buried accounts of violence break through established history, the history of settlement is beset by a twin ambivalence. On the one hand, accounting for frontier violences asserts local histories of encounter over generalising national narratives of settlement. Operating in the opposite direction, violence becomes a precondition for nationhood, associating the shedding of blood with sacrifice and elevating violent encounter into a kind of civil action. To the extent that sacrifice and violence are more commonly recognised through the Gallipoli story as inaugurating Australian nationhood, they operate within longstanding discourses of masculine nationfounding in Western liberal democracies.<sup>10</sup> However, the capacity for indigenous Australians to 'speak back' and 'talk up' to dominant histories through their own long-standing generational memories besets celebratory encounter by destabilising the foundational heroism associated with sacrificial elements of violent encounter.<sup>11</sup>

Ward's willing evocation of the bushman as an Australian frontiersman counteracted any sense that the vigour and entrepreneurial attitudes implied by the Turnerian thesis could be replaced by less sanguine features. Fred Alexander had argued that the process of settlement had resulted in a deterioration in the Australian male character, such that by the 1940s laziness and subservience were prevalent.<sup>12</sup> Alexander regarded this depletion as resulting from the deep incorporation of English values and institutions in Australian settler-colonial society. When Paul Sharp later elaborated on this idea, he added that frontier expansion was also destructive to Aborigines, an expression of the view that Aboriginal people would inevitably decline in the face of prosperous, energetic northern European immigrants.<sup>13</sup> Alexander's bleak regard for male character and Sharp's account of ruinous race relations in

<sup>7</sup> McLean, *White Aborigines*, pp. 18, 89.

<sup>8</sup> Brunt, 'Clumsy Utopians', p. 271.

<sup>9</sup> Rose, *Hidden Histories*.

<sup>10</sup> Lake, 'Mission Impossible'; Taussig, *The Magic of the State*, pp. 3, 195.

<sup>11</sup> Moreton-Robinson, *Talkin' Up to the White Woman*.

<sup>12</sup> Alexander, *Moving Frontiers*, p. 35.

<sup>13</sup> Sharp, 'Three Frontiers'.

Australia faulted the seductive persuasion of the frontier as a series of heroic struggles by settlers against Aborigines. Their pessimistic musings on the imperial utopia of a distinctive Australian civil society are early examples, later exemplified in the diverse works of C. D. Rowley, Henry Reynolds, Noel Loos, Deborah Bird Rose, and Patrick Wolfe, of the desire to engage in redemptive history by confronting violent settler-Aboriginal encounters and wrestling with the enigmatic moral episteme that places that particular violence at the core of Australian nationhood.<sup>14</sup>

Contemporary Australian frontier studies have bifurcated into remnant interpretations of Turner's ideas on the one hand<sup>15</sup> to a diversity of approaches wherein frontier is taken to be a discursive trope that settler society generates to give authority to the formations of civil society and cultural and gendered hegemonies.<sup>16</sup> Certainly the most well-known contemporary works on Australian frontiers are by Reynolds whose chronicling of settler-Aboriginal conflict has found great purchase in Australian studies.<sup>17</sup> Less well known but no less considerable has been the attention Rowley gave in a trilogy of books published through the 1970s detailing the radical changes affected on Aboriginal people by Australian governments since British colonisation.<sup>18</sup> Despite their considerable differences both employ the frontier to interrogate the extent to which the nation-state 'Australia' is founded on the violence and depredation of colonial encounter. In doing so they confront the 'cult of forgetfulness' that characterised white Australia's ignorance of the effects of colonialism on Aboriginal people. Their work also encapsulates the paradox embedded in frontier logic: in confronting Aboriginal dispossession and slaughter as unacknowledged presences within settler naturalisation narratives, a consensus is created about the relationship between history, settler identity and social order and land.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Reynolds, *The Other Side of the Frontier*; Rose, *Hidden Histories*; Reynolds, *Frontier*; Loos, *Invasion and Resistance*; Wolfe, 'Nation and Miscegenation'.

<sup>15</sup> Winks concluded in his 1981 analysis whether the Turnerian frontier could be observed in Australia, that it is more appropriate to talk of Australian frontiers rather than a single defining period of set of events. Ten years later Peter Loveday (1991) discusses Turner's frontier hypothesis in terms of political economy concluding that north Australia has been too far away from the rest of Australia to have any lasting impact on its national identity and that the frontier is a developmental stage that has passed in this region.

<sup>16</sup> In *Rednecks, Eggheads and Blackfellas* Cowlshaw (p. 17) uses the term 'racial frontier' to think through racism and racial differentiation in contemporary northern Australia, while in *Creating a Nation* Grimshaw et al. (p. 132) use the idea of the frontier to provoke questions about how class, ethnicity and gender worked their way through opposing groups in the 19th century. In 'Frontier Transgressions: Writing a History of Race, Identity and Convictism in Early Colonial Queensland' Thorpe and Evans expand the notion of identity frontiers.

<sup>17</sup> Reynolds, *The Other Side of the Frontier*; Reynolds, *Frontier*; May, *Aboriginal Labour and the Cattle Industry*; McGrath, *Born in the Cattle*, p. 9.

<sup>18</sup> Rowley, *The Destruction of Aboriginal Society*, *Outcasts in White Australia* and *The Remote Aborigines*.

<sup>19</sup> Stanner, *After the Dreaming*, p. 25.

Rowley's adherence to Turner's successive frontiers model and Reynolds's recognition of the plurality of Aboriginal reactions to European settlement does not shift 'frontier' as an ideological process that defines the privileged status of 'settler' by reference to encounter with Aborigines. In frontier logic Aborigines define settler – the alterity of Aborigines is respected because they are necessary to the constant reaffirmation of settlerhood. The most immediate problem with enjoining the complexity of encounter to the goal of creating a distinctive settler nation is the difficulty of acknowledging or accounting for the spaces of encounter beyond the encompassing rubric of frontier. It is precisely at this point that the authors here announce their intention to dislocate frontier historiography, and at the same time to probe the symbolic energy of the frontier in its refusal to relinquish its territorial hold over the terms within which settler Australia conceives an Australian social order.

## **Frontier, self and other**

The focus on Aborigines as the defining 'other' to settlers in the Australian nation is no more than a recognition that the basic parameters of frontier ideology produces a set of relationships wherein the symbolic function of Aborigines is to create the privileged and naturalised status of the settler. But there is a further distinction to be drawn which extends from Juliet Mitchell's recognition that 'we live as ideas', that the circulation of symbolic order through social being and individual experience not only creates alliances of identity and power but allows for more negotiable, liminal, contested and transformative exchanges to occur between different groups of people. This is not to suggest that the grounds of exchange exist beyond forces of repression and intolerance or imply compatibility and free-flowing authentic reciprocity. More, that the discourses and practices of Australian frontier cross-cultural encounter that wend their way through to politico-economic structures already evince the influence of the subaltern symbolic systems and lifeways of Australia's indigenous peoples.

This infiltrative movement within an already established logic that establishes colonial rule over the lands and seas of Australia's indigenous peoples is most recently evident in the historic 1992 *Mabo v. Queensland* judgement of the Australian High Court. This case involved a claim by Meriam people to ownership of land on the island of Mer (Murray Island) in eastern Torres Strait, north Queensland. The *Mabo* decision recognised for the first time that indigenous, or native, title to land, which had hitherto been excluded from Australian common law, could be protected by the common law. Prior to this decision the principle of *terra nullius*, that Australia was uninhabited or at best inhabited by peoples who had no systems of social organisation and property ownership that compelled colonial recognition, gave exclusive radical title of Australian lands to the Crown. The *Mabo* decision overturned the legal basis of colonial sovereignty, recognising rights to indigenous use and ownership of land where

they were not extinguished by the Crown, necessitating a series of legislative actions by the Commonwealth that validated pastoral and mining leases and constrained the procedures by which Australia's indigenous population could proceed on native title claims (Native Title Act 1993 and 1998).<sup>20</sup>

Despite the Commonwealth's legislative attempts to rein in the property law implications of native title, the moral hierarchies of colonised and coloniser established under the shelter of *terra nullius* became subject to searching investigation among the Australian population. If there was ever a consensus operating amongst the majority of the non-indigenous population about the moral rights to settlement that colonial occupation ensured, it was surely shattered in the Mabo decision. Ensuing cultural and political debates revealed agonistic and antagonistic public attitudes around the treatment of Australia's indigenous population, both past and present, and subjected the 'doctrine of the settled colony' to intense public scrutiny.<sup>21</sup> Legal entitlement became inextricably linked to questions of national identity. The seemingly inviolable ridge between legal precedent and settlement that was ruptured by Mabo also destabilises the demands of oppositional categories of self and other, settler and indigenous, colonised and coloniser that informs the presumptions of established frontiers. However, if this destabilisation amounts to no more than a vulgar deconstruction of types or narratives or lumps together all differences into a single 'other', then we have missed the responses to alterity that are the true terrain of the frontier trope. In this elusive, fragmented, fissured space the 'attractions and aversions' (to borrow a phrase from Adorno) of encounter are compellingly demonstrated. It is perhaps an overly didactic observation, but it should be stated that the acculturative, hybrid overtones are not the necessary endgame of cross-cultural interaction. In keeping with the project of 'dislocating the frontier,' theme, some chapters attest to the incommensurable differences of cultural attitudes and philosophies that inform encounter. They compel us to be alert to unacknowledged indigenous and non-indigenous expressions of describing encounter, force a re-evaluation of what constitutes frontier; how it is experienced, imagined, and absorbed; how it discriminates, and how it is opposed. If frontier mythology has traditionally been understood as indiscriminate apology for conquest then these recognitions show that this configuration has yet to determine a coeval indigenous register.

The notion that the frontier naturalises processes of inhabitation by colonisers to colonised lands is carefully explored by Liz Furniss's examination of the usages of frontier symbolism in recent Canadian and Australian political discourse (Chapter 2). She begins with a survey of the major theoretical trends in North American scholarship on the relationship between concepts of frontier and

<sup>20</sup> Bartlett, *The Mabo Decision*, p. 42.

<sup>21</sup> Reynolds, *Aboriginal Sovereignty*, p. 13.

nationhood. Of particular value is her overview of critical approaches to Turner's frontier thesis that have occurred since the 1960s and have come to be referred to as the New Western History. In concluding her overview she raises questions that point to the disjuncture between the analytical (in)adequacy of the term and the populist power of associated symbolisms. Through an insightful discussion of the anti-indigenous rhetorics that have recently been employed in Canadian and Australian political discourse, she demonstrates that the popular usages of frontier thinking in both countries are at once too fluid for concise analytical capture, and yet tend strongly to situate the autonomy and livelihood of Aboriginal peoples as a national threat. Furniss's analysis of these two issues leads her to conclude that scholarly uses of the term collude with populist understandings as shared moments in nationalist mythology.

Collusion between contrasting ideas or conflicting groups holds forth the possibility that on the way past the dispossessing aspects of encounter a qualitative exchange between cultures resulting in redemptive advancement might occur. Taken at face value, the story of Australian artist Ainslie Roberts's relatively benign experiences of relating to the Aboriginal people and country of Palka-karrinya (Central Mount Wedge station), Central Australia, suggests such an inter-cultural dialogue. But, as Deborah Bird Rose shows in Chapter 3, the devil is in the detail, and in Roberts's case his personal and artistic fascination with Aboriginal land sacrality mirrors that stream in the Australian imagination that seeks, through mystical yearnings, a cure for past injustices. Through an analysis of Roberts's Palka-karrinya influenced work and his relationship to the ethnologist Charles Mountford, Rose is able to show how Roberts's personal quest for meaning was not only an expression of national existential concern, but transformed local religious affinities into Jungian-like religious universals. Rose recognises that this transformation effects an effacement of Aboriginal cultural expressions and uses colonial land-based resource use language to evoke the subtle violences informing these processes. Thus, Aboriginal knowledge is an 'ore body that could be mined by anyone with the talent for tapping into the unconscious.' That said, Rose cautions that what looks like the erasure of Palka-karrinya specificity in Roberts's work should be understood in terms of the transportation of highly specific Aboriginal invocations of environmental connections and iconography to Australian metropolises. The original Palka-karrinya conceptions continue despite Roberts's personal encounters and artistic transformations.

The expansion of inward-looking boundaries by encounter with Aboriginal people and place are closely allied to an experience of frontier as an outward moving boundary between the ordered and familiar and the unfamiliar and disordered. Nicholas Gill's examination of immigrant pastoralists' narratives of settlement in Central Australia stands in a critical relationship to the sense that the frontier is an expanding, overcoming boundary (Chapter 4). Their tendency

to define relationships to land largely in terms of personal and family bodily engagement with land leads Gill to question 'whether the relationship between settler pastoralists is comparable to that of Aboriginal people.' The answers are both mundane and surprising. At one level the employment by both Aborigines and settlers of the idea that creatively interacting with the land brings about social order and shapes the environment would seem commensurable. The linkages, though undeniably present, belie radically different affinities: the acts of ancestral beings unfold to weave Aboriginal people, land and law together in spiritual as well as experiential ways. By contrast settlers understand their arrival in Central Australia as a homecoming, awakening a vacant, unfamiliar land to its fertile potential. In contrast to the strong sense of masculine wrestling with land that Gunn describes, Central Australian settlers project a more feminine imagining of nurturance on to the landscape.

In Chapter 5 Jay Arthur takes an innovative approach to frontier landscapes by treating water as an active agent with whom settlers have had to contend and which forever disappoints them by failing to conform to expectations. She works with the transitional edges between watercourses and land and notes that their 'drying out', as they gradually disappear into man-made containers, mirrors an increasingly regulated hydrography in Australia. In the following chapter (Chapter 6) Pat Lowe shows how seemingly innocuous events, such as losing objects and coping with car breakdowns, are as rich with meaning about the frontier as are public conflicts over ownership of natural resources. Through her relationship with Jimmy Pike, a Walmajarri man, she moves from her initial experience of the Upper Sandy Desert as monotonous sameness to an understanding of the complexity of shapes and textures that inform Walmajarri relationships to these spaces. We are also reminded by Lowe that while she is able to develop understanding of and relationships with desert country, for many Aboriginal people who were originally resident in this region and who now reside in the Kimberley towns, separation from these lands, whether by force or force of events, induces a kind of disorienting exile.

The capacity to comprehend difference is presented by Libby Robin as a heroic process of subjecting what is alien to familiar principles of order (Chapter 7). The story Robin recounts is the quest for the scientific classification of platypuses found in northern Queensland in the latter decades of the 19th century by Australian and European scientists. The echoes of an antipodean fabulity play about this creature, as does the struggle to overcome the marginality of Australian science to the English scientific establishment. However, it is Robin's singular achievement to note that this famous moment of imperial traffic between the Australian colony and metropolis was entirely dependent on another imperial exchange between explorers and Aborigines. Platypuses and other anomalies such as lungfish and echidna, presented classificatory problems for scientists of the time as well as the enticing possibility that they might bridge between



seemingly discrete classes of animals. Libby notes that 19th century scientists regularly hired Aboriginal assistance in scientific expeditions, but scientists on the hunt for platypuses, lungfish and echidna relied on huge numbers of Aboriginal people, up to 150 by William Caldwell, who were hired for both their labour and knowledge of ecology and animal habitat. While European scientists were yet to understand the developmental stages of these animals' growth, Aboriginal identification and capture of animals at various stages of their life cycle allowed scientific understanding to develop, making them genuine but unacknowledged co-workers in discovery. The exchange of labour and knowledge between Aborigine and scientific explorer translated into the traffic between colony and metropole of the denouement of discovery – names. Once classified and garbed with Latin names these animals were birthed into an imperial scientific order operating independently and indifferently to local symbolic or evaluative systems.

The scientific use of frontier concepts in gaining an imaginative purchase on remote Australia offers the possibility that national aspirations for economic self-sufficiency might be fulfilled. Tim Sherratt examines atomic utopias, and the fear/hope duality founded in frontier connections between science and progress (Chapter 8). He focuses particularly on the energy industry of North Australia, and interrogates the imagining of the nation's future embedded in the scientific frontier imagination. The progressive aspects of frontier thinking become glaringly obvious in the imagined post Second World War atomic age. Sherratt notes that the nationalistic language of expansion and opportunity attached to the atomic utopia, *Australia Unlimited*, has its own curious life and reappears in contemporary popular debates over Australia's economic future. He suggests that the futuristic implications of recurring alignments of science, frontier and economy are always shadowed by the accumulation of past dreams and hopes.

These chapters have explored aspects of settler's attempt to lodge themselves in land that is already invigorated by its own geographic distinctiveness and indigenous bearings. Each chapter remarked on a frontier tabula rasa imagining that ideally absents indigenous people, while uncovering the extent to which indigenous Australians are present or implicated in such imaginings. The following three chapters look to Aboriginal engagements with frontier practice, and examine some of the ways in which Aboriginal people's cultural practice destabilises and critiques frontier imagination. The authors work from spaces adjacent to the frontier, where transformations and distortions are possible.

In my own chapter, Chapter 9, I discuss the place of rodeo in frontier imagination, particularly Aboriginal organised rodeos that occur throughout the Kimberley. Rodeo events are sometimes regarded as carrying the symbolic structures of classical frontiers in that they replay, through competitive bovine and horse

riding, relationships of racial and environmental dominance. In terms of their capacity to bring together people involved in cattle grazing, rodeos have replaced race meets as the most common rural festival in northwestern Australia. Also, Aboriginal rodeos draw attention to changes in land ownership in the Kimberley pastoral industry where Aboriginal people own almost a third of the pastoral leases there. This situation is immensely different to the ration life of station camps that Aboriginal people lived in prior to the late 1960s where they were unable to exercise proprietary control over station lands and cattle.<sup>22</sup> The performance of Aboriginal cowboys in rodeos prides open a provocative, inter-cultural space where the conditions for identity frisson and exchange across cultures does not suggest an inability to traverse turbulent pasts, cultural boundaries and distinctive geographic grounding of peoples in the world.

In Chapter 10 Stephen Muecke dramatically shifts our perception by describing a Kalkatungu man named Boxer, a maban, a 'magic' who created the *Djanba* cult and who lived with the Duracks in the East Kimberley. Boxer's life on the white-owned stations and his *Djanba* response implies different senses of 'order' and unsettling understandings of inside and outside. Just as importantly Muecke presents Boxer as both a cultural critic and a cultural innovator. As innovator Boxer heralded new social arrangements and world concepts amongst Aboriginal people; as critic Boxer shakes things up by inaugurating, through *Djanba*, a powerful intellectual response to whitefella ways and technology. And if, as Muecke says, Boxer is best approached through deconstructive method, then the rewards seem great for Boxer appears as a philosopher of renown, a man whose performative response to the Kimberley pastoral frontier opens up paths of understanding and investigation beyond the familiar landmarks of Aboriginal resistance to, or complicity with, the frontier situation. Through Boxer's *Djanba* we are granted an enhanced understanding of an Aboriginal intellectual and creative endeavour that acknowledges the critical and open-ended negotiations, which mark Aboriginal efforts towards survival in frontier situations.

The following chapter provides an account of Aboriginal reclamation of country that was abandoned by previous generations of Aboriginal people. In Chapter 11 Andrew McWilliam describes the movement of people and names through the Fitzmaurice River region in western Northern Territory. We are introduced to an unfamiliar Aboriginal frontier that is becoming increasingly familiar for many Aboriginal people around Australia. As a consequence of favourable accounts of the pastoral potential of the region generated by A. C. Gregory, a number of stations, including Victoria River Downs, were established during the 1880s, leading to a gradual out-migration of the Aboriginal population from the basin. McWilliam describes a number of other boundaries that the river demarcates: the extent of sub-section naming systems and ritual subincision

<sup>22</sup> See Rowse, *White Flour, White Power*.

practices; and newer land uses expressed by Aboriginal freehold land on the northern side and army-owned land on the southern side. Surprisingly, the different 'exogenous' (settler) land uses have not resulted in a wide array of place names. Through his work for the Aboriginal Areas Protection Authority, McWilliam finds that the region is more of a *terra ignomia* than a known geography for settlers. Likewise for Aboriginal people with traditional attachments to the area, there is much enigmatic space around the river despite ongoing reaffirmation and reclamation of the area. The Aboriginal depopulation of the region has resulted in an emptiness.

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## **2. Imagining the frontier: comparative perspectives from Canada and Australia**

**Elizabeth Furniss**

The idea of the frontier reflects a uniquely colonial view of a place and process of encounter between colonising people, indigenous inhabitants, and natural landscapes.<sup>1</sup> Within this colonial context, the idea of the frontier has been variously developed through history by natural and social scientists, popular historians, artists, writers, and government officials. This volume draws together a similarly diverse group of people who bring somewhat different conceptual approaches and theoretical interests to their studies of the frontier, which raises the immediate question: what do we mean when we talk about ‘the frontier’? In the following pages, and before turning to the substantive matter of this paper, I wish to first explore this problem of conceptualisation and definition by surveying how scholars have used the concept of the frontier in studies of colonial societies. The idea of the frontier is not unique to Australia, but is one of the founding metaphors of all settler societies, finding its expression in a range of venues from official histories and literary and artistic productions to political discourse. In the remaining pages I take an ethnographic perspective on the idea of the frontier in settler cultures, and compare how the frontier is imagined within Canadian and Australian notions of national identity and history as expressed in the anti-native title discourse of two leading right-wing political parties: the One Nation Party in Australia and the Reform Party in Canada. I conclude by suggesting some ways in which a comparative analysis of frontier imagery can contribute to an understanding of the unique ways in which north Australian identity, history, and landscape are represented.

### **Frontier studies in academic scholarship**

**Frederick Jackson Turner**

Any survey of academic studies of the frontier would have to start with a consideration of the work of Frederick Jackson Turner. In 1893 Turner delivered his paper ‘The Significance of the Frontier in American History’ to a meeting of the American Historical Association in Chicago. Over the next decade Turner’s ‘frontier thesis’ received widespread acclaim among both academics and the

<sup>1</sup> This paper, written in 2000, draws upon research I conducted while on a postdoctoral fellowship from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and based at the Centre for Cross-Cultural Research at The Australian National University, Canberra. I am grateful to both institutions for their support.

general public. Turner became a leading figure in the historical profession over the next decades, and his frontier thesis continued to have a profound influence through much of the 20th century.

What was the frontier thesis? Turner argued that American history, culture, and political institutions were shaped not by America's British heritage, but instead by the unique environment of North America. Specifically, it was from the frontier experience that uniquely American culture and political institutions were forged. As Turner so boldly and succinctly stated in the opening paragraph of his treatise: 'The existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward, explain American development'.<sup>2</sup> This is what Turner imagined: settlers moving westward to the frontier gradually shed the trappings of civilisation. Surrounded by wilderness, the settlers were in essence overwhelmed by nature. In order to survive and in the absence of a social framework and traditions, settlers were forced to revert to the 'primitive' ways of the 'savages' they encountered: the settler travelled by birch-bark canoe, survived by hunting, lived in a rough log cabin, and 'takes the scalp in orthodox Indian fashion'.<sup>3</sup> In short, he underwent a process of social devolution. But soon the settler began to master the wilderness: fields were cleared, towns were created, and a new society developed. The frontier environment, Turner believed, was selective of certain values: individualism, resourcefulness, self-sufficiency, and democracy. What emerged from the frontier crucible was not the old civilisation left behind, but the 'new American' who fully embraced these values, which in turn came to underlie American national character and democratic institutions. This, then, is how the frontier explains American development.

What did Turner mean by the term 'frontier'? Turner used various definitions, claiming that the term was 'an elastic one' that did not need to be clearly defined.<sup>4</sup> On the one hand, he defined the term by demographic criteria, following the convention of the US Census Bureau, as those zones on the peripheries of regions having a population density (of settlers) of two or more people per square mile.<sup>5</sup> Seen in these terms, the frontier was a largely uninhabited region (of course, erasing an indigenous presence), and therefore a region of 'free, unoccupied land' (free in the sense that the American government deemed the land open to pre-emption by settlers, regardless of Indian ownership or claims). Turner considered the frontier not as a fixed place, but rather a moving zone of occupation, a moving place that swept from east to west as settlers pushed further and further towards the Pacific. In the early days of settlement, he noted, the

<sup>2</sup> Turner, *The Frontier in American History*, p. 1.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*



frontier was on the Atlantic coast; in the 1820s the frontier was along the Great Lakes and beyond the Mississippi; by 1880 settlers had pushed the frontier westward well into the Great Plains. On the other hand, Turner defined the frontier in a second sense, envisioning it not only as a place but as a process of encounter. The frontier was 'the meeting point between savagery and civilisation',<sup>6</sup> between man and nature, between settler and Indian. The frontier was a zone of intensive social devolution and reformation, where settlers became stripped of the trappings of civilisation, only to be recreated and reborn into values, traditions, and social forms that Turner considered uniquely American. In short, Turner argued that 'The frontier is the line of most rapid and effective Americanisation'.<sup>7</sup>

Turner's frontier thesis emerged at a particular time in history. We can see the influence of the 19th century notions of environmental determinism, Social Darwinism, cultural evolutionism and Manifest Destiny. Nor was Turner the first to assert the importance of the frontier to American history and culture. Others before him, from Benjamin Franklin to Thomas Jefferson and Theodore Roosevelt, had linked the frontier experience to the creation of uniquely American democratic institutions and the values of independence, individualism, self-sufficiency, resistance to imposed authority, and so on.<sup>8</sup> For over a century American literature had described the frontier experience: in this corpus of work American history *became* the history of the frontier, which in turn came to define American national identity.<sup>9</sup> The immense popularity of Turner's frontier thesis had less to do with the novelty of his ideas – Turner merely adapted ideas and sentiments that had long existed about the frontier to the setting of academic history as an explanatory theory. But he did so at a time in which public attention was focused on the frontier region of the nation.

In the 1890s the frontier was officially announced to have closed: non-indigenous settlement had spread to all reaches of the nation, and there were no more tracts of 'free land' available for settlers to pre-empt. To many it signalled a critical juncture in American history. For three hundred years colonists and settlers had based their existence around the relatively unrestricted pursuit and exploitation of natural resources, from which a distinct set of political and cultural values had developed. What would happen to these values and traditions once the frontier had disappeared? By the late 1800s the closure of the agrarian frontier was coupled with an increasing industrialisation of the agrarian economy and a concentration of wealth and power in the hands of a few individuals and companies, while independent farmers were losing land to debt and becoming

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*, p. 304.

<sup>8</sup> Billington, *The American Frontier Thesis*, p. 108; Slotkin, *The Fatal Environment*, pp. 29-31.

<sup>9</sup> Slotkin, *Regeneration through Violence; The Fatal Environment*.

tenants on industrial properties.<sup>10</sup> Turner's frontier thesis, in this respect, had two functions. First, it served as a legitimisation and celebration of the processes of American colonisation and the dispossession of the lands of indigenous peoples. In Turner's account, indigenous peoples and their ownership to traditional territories were erased through the image of the 'free land with abundant resources' and the image of indigenous savagery, an image that only justified the purportedly retributive acts of settler violence, settlers having inevitably 'become like Indians' under the force of the frontier. Second and more significantly, Turner's frontier thesis, having established the legitimacy of settlement and dispossession, then idealised the agrarian past while crystallizing growing public concerns about the future of the nation. It served as a populist critique of the developing social and political inequalities in American society, inequalities that many believed threatened the very values and ideals that the frontier represented.<sup>11</sup>

Turner's frontier thesis enjoyed remarkable popularity through the early 20th century. Despite its origins in a Western populist critique, the frontier thesis was taken up by Eastern political conservatives who promoted, in the words of one critic, a 'complacent nationalist romanticism' in which 'the notion of an aggressive pioneering national spirit nurtured by repeated exposure to primitive conditions became a means to national self-glorification'.<sup>12</sup> Beginning in the 1920s the thesis was subjected to a number of significant challenges from within the discipline. Scholars critiqued the frontier thesis for overemphasizing the single determining influence of the frontier environment and for ignoring how other forces, such as class struggle, urbanisation, industrialisation, Protestantism, ethnic heterogeneity, the slave system, and the growth of international capitalism, had influenced the course of American history.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, and in part due to the frontier thesis's association with a strident American nationalism, Turner's influence lingered for many decades while interest in studies of the American west waned.

It was not until the 1960s and 1970s that interest again arose in the history of the American west, and a new approach began to emerge to challenge the frontier thesis. By the 1980s, under the influence of such historians as Patricia Limerick, Richard White, and Donald Worster, this new approach began to take form as the New Western History.

<sup>10</sup> Billington, *Frederick Jackson Turner*, pp. 108-110; Slotkin, *The Fatal Environment*, pp. 31-2.

<sup>11</sup> Slotkin, *The Fatal Environment*, pp. 108-110.

<sup>12</sup> Hoftstadter, 'The Frontier Thesis Under Attack', p. 23.

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.*; Billington, *The American Frontier Thesis*, pp. 5-9; Nash, *Creating the West*.

## The New Western History

The New Western History movement has been shaped by a number of social forces in the 1960s and 1970s, namely the rise of public concern with race relations, women's rights, Indian rights, multiculturalism and ethnic pluralism. The New Western History reflects the intellectual influence of both feminist scholarship and the new social history in general, which emphasises the diversity of historical experiences and the need to recover voices of the 'ordinary' people often ignored by nationalist, grand-level historical studies. Much of the early writing took the form of polemic denunciation of the Turnerian legacy in Western history, with promoters attempting to mark off ways in which the new approach was unique. Following Patricia Limerick's characterisation,<sup>14</sup> and supplemented by other contributors to the volume *Trails: Toward a New Western History*,<sup>15</sup> we come up with the following features.

Scholars such as Limerick have entirely rejected use of the term 'frontier' as an object of study, the term being too 'nationalistic', 'racist', and ethnocentric to be useful.<sup>16</sup> Rather than focusing on the frontier as a process, a moving line of encounter (in Turner's second sense of the term), many New Western Historians focus on the West as a distinct place, the West being that region from the Mississippi to the Pacific, although these boundaries are also debated. Unlike Turner, who saw the purported disappearance of the frontier in the 1890s as a pivotal event signifying a radical disjuncture in Western history, the new historians argue that there has been no such discontinuity, and that the West has remained a distinctive region into the present.<sup>17</sup> These historians are interested in recovering the voices of the multiple populations that inhabited and settled the West: different indigenous peoples, Hispanics, Chinese, blacks, women, and others. This contrasts sharply with Turner's simplistic formulation of the frontier encounter involving only two groups: white male settlers and generic 'Indians'. The new historians are interested in looking at the environment not as a barrier to Western expansion, but a component that changes with human interaction. They highlight how ecological factors, and human/environment interactions, influenced the path of Western history. Challenging Turner's celebratory approach that emphasised frontier social harmony and egalitarianism, the new historians are examining also the tragedies of western expansion: the destruction of the environment, the massacres of indigenous populations, the ambiguities, difficulties and disappointments of settlers' lives. As a result, they are stripping the frontier, the expansion of settlement Westward, of much of its sacredness as a source of national values. Finally, the new historians are

<sup>14</sup> Limerick, 'What on Earth is the New Western History?'.  
<sup>15</sup> Limerick, Milner and Rankin, *Trails: Toward a New Western History*.  
<sup>16</sup> Limerick, 'What on Earth is the New Western History?', p. 85.  
<sup>17</sup> For example, Limerick, 'The Trail to Santa Fe', pp. 70-71.

redefining the historian's social role, and (in at least some instances) are abandoning their image of neutral objectivity and displaying an empathetic and critical concern with their subjects of study.

Despite the above summary, the New Western History is by no means a coherent field. Indeed, a significant literature debates just precisely what this approach constitutes and just how unique it really is from the Turnerian legacy. For example, Faragher,<sup>18</sup> Steiner,<sup>19</sup> Klein,<sup>20</sup> Wrobel,<sup>21</sup> and Bogue<sup>22</sup> all highlight continuities between the 'old' and 'new' Western histories. There has also been a move to reclaim the 'f-word'.<sup>23</sup> Simply abandoning the term 'frontier' does not protect historical analyses from ethnocentrism, Klein believes, and in his view the term is not too laden with implicit ethnocentrism that it cannot be successfully resuscitated. Several scholars have recently re-introduced the term into their analyses, defining the frontier as a zone of cultural interaction.<sup>24</sup> In all, what the new Western histories provide is not so much a new paradigm, but an opening up of multiple perspectives and possibilities for new critical intellectual inquiries into the study of the American West.

## Richard Slotkin and the frontier myth

A third figure that has contributed immensely to contemporary frontier studies is Richard Slotkin, Professor of English and Director of American Studies at Wesleyan University. In a sense, Slotkin's mission is similar to that of the New Western Historians: to escape the ideological baggage of the frontier thesis, and to look anew at American history. Slotkin, instead, turns the idea of the frontier in the United States itself into a subject of critical inquiry.

Slotkin has written three volumes tracing the development of the 'frontier myth' over three centuries of American history.<sup>25</sup> The frontier myth, he argues, is one of the most important cultural myths shaping public understandings of European colonisation and settlement in the United States. It consists of a constellation of narratives, symbols and metaphors that flow through American literature (including the earliest of settler autobiographies of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, 19<sup>th</sup> century dime novels, and contemporary pioneer literature); performative arts (including early Wild West shows and today's Hollywood movies), and 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century political discourse legitimizing American domestic and foreign policy. Despite

<sup>18</sup> Faragher, 'The Frontier Trail'.

<sup>19</sup> Steiner, 'From Frontier to Region'.

<sup>20</sup> Klein, 'Reclaiming the 'F' Word'.

<sup>21</sup> Wrobel, 'Beyond the Frontier-Region Dichotomy'.

<sup>22</sup> Bogue, *Frederick Jackson Turner*.

<sup>23</sup> Klein, 'Reclaiming the 'F' Word'.

<sup>24</sup> Limerick, 'The Adventures of the Frontier in the Twentieth Century' and Klein, 'Reclaiming the 'F' Word, provide overviews of this debate.

<sup>25</sup> Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence; The Fatal Environment; Gunfighter Nation*.

the different formulations of the frontier myth in these very different social, economic and historical contexts (and Slotkin includes Turner's frontier thesis as one expression of the frontier myth), in its most common 'progressivist' formulation the frontier myth has several standard features.<sup>26</sup>

The frontier myth portrays North America as an empty, unoccupied wilderness (not withstanding occasional acknowledgment of the indigenous presence) where resources are rich and land is free for the taking; or, if not exactly free, the land becomes the rightful spoil of war for those representing the interests of civilisation and progress. The symbolic landscape of the frontier narrative is marked by boundaries and by the encounter of opposites: civilisation and savagery, man and nature, Whites and Indians, good and evil. These encounters are characterised in terms of conflict and violence as the protagonist struggles against the harsh environment, the unknown and potentially hostile Indians, the savagery of the empty land. Eventually these encounters are resolved through domination and conquest, through the subordination of Indians, nature, and evil to the forces of progress, civilisation, and the ultimate will of God. The triumph of the protagonist highlights the triumph of the values of self-reliance, democracy, competition, and freedom, values that continue to define American ideals in the present.

The frontier myth thus provides a theory of history in which conflict, violence, and the subjugation of nature and indigenous peoples are legitimated as natural and inevitable for ensuring the 'progress' of civilisation. The frontier myth provides a master narrative of 'regeneration through violence', through which American identity was initially defined, and continues to be continually reasserted, through acts of aggressive violence.<sup>27</sup> Slotkin sees this key metaphor of regeneration through violence, and this foundational narrative of history, to be continually expressed in diverse arenas of cultural and political activity, ranging from the military aggression of American foreign policy to the crop of urban vigilante movies produced by Hollywood in the 1980s. It is through such acts of heroic, aggressive intervention that American national identity is continually expressed and celebrated.

The resilience of the frontier myth as a dominant cultural myth is due to two features. The first is its flexibility: it provides a set of narratives, symbols, images and metaphors that can be used either to affirm or to contest existing social and political arrangements. Populist forms of the frontier myth, Slotkin argues, have been among the most important vehicles for public criticism in the 20th century.<sup>28</sup> These narratives construct ideal images of the past (ranging from romantic notions of pre-contact Aboriginal life to the idyllic images of 19<sup>th</sup> century agrarian

<sup>26</sup> Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, pp. 22-24.

<sup>27</sup> Slotkin, *Regeneration through Violence*.

<sup>28</sup> Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, pp. 22-26.

communities of the American West) and launch critiques of the policies and developments that have brought about an abandonment of older traditional values and the destruction of social ties. Turner's frontier thesis is one such example. What remains consistent in populist versions is the standard narrative structure of the frontier myth: the binary encounter of opposites on the frontier, the centrality of conflict and violence to their encounter, and the outcome of absolute conquest; now however, the moral weighting of these agents and outcomes is reversed.

Second, the frontier myth conveys historical truths not so much through explicit, argumentative forms of discourse, but indirectly through narratives rich in symbolism and metaphor. 'The language is metaphorical and suggestive rather than logical or analytical', Slotkin asserts. 'The movement of a mythic narrative, like that of any story, implies a theory of cause and effect and therefore a theory of history (or even of cosmology); but these ideas are offered in a form that disarms critical analysis by its appeal to the structures and traditions of storytelling and the clichés of historical memory.'<sup>29</sup> Of particular importance are 'mythic icons', which stand as condensed symbols of the frontier myth's narrative, and which 'effect a poetic construction of tremendous economy and compression and a mnemonic device capable of evoking a complex system of historical associations by a single image or phrase'.<sup>30</sup> The symbol of the 'pioneer', the 'empty wilderness', and even 'the frontier' are classic examples of mythic icons. Their power, thus, lies in their ability to convey certain myths of history intuitively and indirectly in such a subtle manner that often lies beyond our critical awareness.

What can we conclude about the concept of the frontier in academic studies of colonial histories? First, the term has been used in two quite distinct senses: as a descriptive/analytical term describing a presumably empirical reality, and as a social construction having no reality outside of the cultural imaginings of colonial societies. Is there such a thing as the frontier? In one of Turner's definitions, the frontier was a demographic phenomenon, a region where white settlers were scarce. In another definition, it was a more ambiguous zone of interaction between early settlers/fur traders and Indians/wilderness. In later definitions, the frontier becomes a specifically cultural frontier, a zone of cultural interaction.<sup>31</sup> The term retains its ethnocentric vantage: in its implicit association with expansion into an unknown region, it remains the view of the coloniser, the view from one 'side' of the encounter. There are alternatives; for example,

<sup>29</sup> *ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>30</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> Limerick, 'The Adventures of the Frontier in the Twentieth Century'; Klein, 'Reclaiming the 'F' Word'.

the more neutral term 'borderlands' has been used instead to describe early processes of cultural encounter between colonizing and indigenous peoples.<sup>32</sup>

But what about the term's analytical adequacy? If we use 'frontier' more in an analytical than a descriptive sense, is it useful in assessing patterns of contact between indigenous and colonizing peoples and cultures? Scholars such as Patricia Limerick remain opposed on various grounds, including the term's ethnocentricity, the impreciseness of its definition, and the fact that it leads scholars to only reproduce the error of previous historians who overemphasised the role of the frontier in shaping American history.<sup>33</sup> Further, it is difficult to define the boundaries of the frontier. In many regions of North America, for example, both the material and ideological products of colonizing peoples (the horse, metal goods, ideas and symbols of Christianity) long preceded any direct contact between indigenous peoples and colonisers. This zone of cultural contact is complex and cannot be easily narrowed to a particular place or a span of time. And if, as Slotkin argues, the frontier is a classical mythic icon that carries the burden of the frontier myth through implicit associations and meanings, can the term be stripped of its ethnocentric meanings to be successfully resuscitated and applied to contemporary analyses? Despite careful attempts to define and contextualise our use of the term, can we in fact control how the term is understood by our readership? What meanings may we be inadvertently communicating when we use the term?

There is no easy solution to these questions; that the term seems to be making reappearance in Western American history is indicative of its compelling force, although I would caution scholars (including myself) that we continue to use the term as an analytical device at our own peril. On the other hand, that frontier is an ethnographic reality (as opposed to a descriptive reality or an analytical construct) is beyond question: it is one of the key, founding metaphors of virtually all settler-colonial societies, and serves as a continual source of symbols in the construction of national histories and identities. These are the issues that I now turn to examine.

## **The 'frontier' in Canadian and Australian anti-native title discourse**

All settler-colonial societies face similar dilemmas. As new societies with populations that include both indigenous peoples and immigrants from diverse cultures and world regions, how can a collective sense of national identity, with a shared set of values, goals, and experiences, be constructed, or even imagined? How can settler societies explain and legitimate the process of nation-formation, and the original colonisation and dispossession of indigenous lands? How do

<sup>32</sup> Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*.

<sup>33</sup> Limerick, 'The Adventures of the Frontier in the Twentieth Century'.

they rationalise their historically exploitative and oppressive relations with indigenous peoples? How do they conceive of ongoing relations, and the place of indigenous peoples in contemporary society? These problems are particularly acute in the present, as indigenous peoples are asserting rights to land and self-government, in so doing challenging the very authority of the state and its official histories. How are conservative elements of settler societies responding to the questioning of official history, and to indigenous assertions of native title?

There is a remarkable similarity in the rhetoric of resistance to indigenous claims in settler societies today. In Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, individuals and groups opposed to indigenous claims all argue that these claims violate the basic values and principles of liberal democratic societies: the equality of all citizens, the emphasis on individual rather than collective rights, and democratic (majority rule) government. While public opposition to Aboriginal rights is somewhat similar, the way in which claims to Aboriginal rights are perceived to conflict with national values and to be threats to the very integrity of the nation varies significantly according to the ways in which ideas of colonial nationhood have historically been constructed. In the remaining pages I wish to compare how ideas of settler history, nationhood, and 'the frontier' encounter between colonisers and indigenous peoples/wilderness are imagined in Australia and Canada. I do so by tracing the anti-native title discourse of two prominent right-wing political parties, Pauline Hanson's One Nation party in Australia, and the Reform Party in Canada.<sup>34</sup>

## Australia

Pauline Hanson first entered the political scene in the 1996 Commonwealth elections, when, after being disenfranchised from the Liberal party for her controversial views on Aboriginal issues, she was elected as an independent in the Queensland seat of Oxley. In her maiden speech to parliament, Hanson denounced Aboriginal land rights, multiculturalism and Asian immigration as policies encouraging racial separatism and national divisiveness. She called instead for an Australia of 'one people, one nation, one flag'. Hanson officially launched her new One Nation political party in 1997. Despite predictions that the 'Hanson phenomenon' was transient and lacking serious public appeal, One Nation through the late 1990s became a formidable threat to the Coalition (Liberal/National) and Labor parties. It enjoyed widespread public support in rural regions in northern and western Australia, and achieved an unprecedented success in the Queensland state elections of 1998, electing eleven candidates. By 1999, however, the One Nation Party had become wracked by bitter internal

<sup>34</sup> In 2000 the Reform Party changed its name to the Canadian Reform Conservative Alliance, which merged with the Progressive Conservative party in 2004. This paper traces the political rhetoric of the Reform Party during the 1990s.



disputes and defections – largely over the undemocratic structure of the party – placing its future in serious doubt.

Pauline Hanson's *One Nation* is a typical example of rural, conservative populism.<sup>35</sup> It is critical of the totalitarian powers wielded by the ruling classes, the intellectual elites, and other 'special' groups that are perceived to have an inordinate influence on government. It demands that democracy be restored to make government more fully representative of the interests of 'ordinary' members of 'mainstream' Australia. Hanson is vigorously opposed to multiculturalism and Asian immigration. She has stated: 'I believe we are in danger of being swamped by Asians ... they have their own culture and religion, form ghettos and do not assimilate ... A truly multicultural country can never be strong or united ...'<sup>36</sup> Hanson is against economic globalisation, stating: 'Government ... must stop kowtowing to financial markets, international organisations, world bankers, investment companies and big business people'.<sup>37</sup> She is opposed to foreign investment in Australia and has called for the immediate cessation of aid to foreign countries, stating that governments must 'apply the savings to generate employment here at home'.<sup>38</sup>

The threat to the nation's integrity comes not only from international capitalism and immigration, but also from within. Hanson believes that Australian indigenous people are a 'privileged' class who receive far more benefits than white Australians. She has called for an abolition of ATSIC, the federal government agency responsible for administering Aboriginal affairs, and which she has called 'a corrupt organisation run by an Aboriginal Mafia'.<sup>39</sup> She has called for the rejection of indigenous land rights and the abandonment of all special programs geared to improving the health, employment and living conditions of indigenous peoples. These programs, she insists, are dividing the country into 'black' and 'white', and she demands that all Australians be treated equally. Hanson's deep opposition to indigenous people (and the deeply undemocratic nature of the *One Nation* party) were made all too clear when Hanson stated that, as an elected politician, she intended to fight for 'the white community, the immigrants, Italians, Greeks, whoever, it really doesn't matter – anyone apart from the Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders'.<sup>40</sup>

What conditions allow Hanson to get away with such undemocratic and hostile political rhetoric? How is it that such an inherently intolerant, racist political

<sup>35</sup> Melleuish, 'Pauline Hanson and Australian Conservative Populism'.

<sup>36</sup> From Pauline Hanson's first speech to the federal Parliament, reprinted in 'The Speech that Unified a Nation', *Pauline Hanson's One Nation*, July 1998, p. 2.

<sup>37</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> From a press conference in Adelaide, 13 February 1998, printed in 'Abolishing ATSIC', *Pauline Hanson's One Nation*, July 1998, p. 5.

<sup>40</sup> Wells, 'One Nation and the Politics of Populism', p. 21.

party has suddenly emerged and gained such a groundswell of public support? Here I am less concerned with the political and economic conditions that give rise to such a conservative political movement – rising unemployment levels, increasing internationalisation of the economy, and backlash attitudes towards earlier Labour Government policies that sympathetically addressed Aboriginal issues. Rather, I'm interested in culturally situating Hanson's political rhetoric – at looking at how this rhetoric draws upon and resonates with key understandings of nationhood, of history, and of settler identity in Australia.

First, Hanson defines the Australian nation as an ethnic nation. It is this Britishness that she imagines to be under attack from multiculturalism and Asian immigration. There is indeed a long tradition in Australian politics, popular culture and historiography of defining the Australian nation in terms of its British roots. Politicians at the turn of the last century were concerned with maintaining not only the cultural heritage, but also more precisely the 'racial purity' of Australia's British stock as Australia transformed from a British colony to an independent Commonwealth nation. Political parties and leading newspapers warned of the dangers of racial mixing and advocated 'Australia for the White Man'.<sup>41</sup> In 1901 the Commonwealth government passed the Immigration Restriction Act, inaugurating what became known as the White Australia policy, which effectively restricted non-European immigration to Australia until the late 1940s. The increase of non-British immigration since has fundamentally challenged conservative, established notions of national identity that now sit uneasily alongside newer models of Australia as a multicultural nation.

Australian identity has been traditionally constructed not just in terms of Britishness but also in opposition to Asia. Hanson opposes not just immigration, but Asian immigration in particular. Her rhetoric is an expression of what scholar Ien Ang has called the 'psycho-geographic logic' of the Australian national imagination.<sup>42</sup> Since Federation, Ang argues, Australia has had a split identity emerging from its unique geographical position in the southern hemisphere. On the one hand imagined as a British colony, Australia was yet far from Britain, isolated in the southern hemisphere and surrounded by Asian countries often imagined as foreign and potentially threatening. Indeed, at the turn of the last century the threat of an Asian invasion was one of the most pressing issues faced by the new federal government, a fear reflected in an outpouring of 'invasion novels' that embedded this perceived vulnerability in the popular imagination.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>41</sup> Macintyre, *A Concise History of Australia*, pp. 143, 148.

<sup>42</sup> Ien Ang, 'The Psycho-Geographical Effect', *The New Racism: The Politics of Race and Nationalism in Australia*. This paper was presented to 'The New Australian Racism?' colloquium organised by the Australian Studies Graduate Program Colloquium, The Australian National University, 13 October 1997. No published version yet.

<sup>43</sup> Macintyre, *A Concise History of Australia*, p. 141.

More recently, the fear of an Asian invasion was again raised in public debate in 1984 when controversial historian Geoffrey Blainey publicly condemned what he saw was a 'massive increase in immigration from Asia'.<sup>44</sup> Significantly, he criticised Asian immigration using the rhetoric of military invasion. In the subsequent furor, Blainey defended his views in letters to leading national newspapers, stating: 'I do not accept the view ... that some kind of slow Asian takeover of Australia is inevitable. I do not believe that we are powerless'<sup>45</sup> and 'So we jump as a nation from extreme to extreme. The old White Australia policy said rudely to half the world: Keep out. The new Surrender Australia policy says to that half of the world: Come in'.<sup>46</sup> Other anti-immigration proponents likewise made use of militaristic metaphors to describe the perceived Asian threat. Ian Sinclair, the leader of the National Party, supported the anti-immigration movement, arguing 'If there is any risk of an undue build-up of Asians as against others in the community, then you need to control it. We need ... to reduce the number of Asians'.<sup>47</sup> Extremist organisations spread posters and graffiti urging governments to 'stop the Asian invasion'.<sup>48</sup> Pauline Hanson's concern with being swamped by Asian immigrants is a direct reflection of these established modes of conceiving and defining Australian nationhood in terms of its geographic, military and demographic vulnerability to an Asian takeover. These military themes illustrate how Australian nationhood is imagined to be chronically vulnerable to external Asian threat, and how Australians should be compelled to react swiftly, aggressively, and defensively to protect the nation's integrity.

Pauline Hanson's call to aggressively defend the Australian nation from perceived threats also taps into wider concepts of settler identity and history. Historian Ann Curthoys has argued that master narratives of Australian history typically are stories of victimisation.<sup>49</sup> In contrast to frontier narratives in the United States, in which settlers confidently, aggressively encounter and ultimately triumph in their battle against the wilderness and Indians,<sup>50</sup> and in contrast to those frontier narratives in Canada in which settlers are surrounded by and passively endure a fearful landscape and are frozen into passive inactivity in the process,<sup>51</sup> in Australia the master narratives are of a kind of victimisation that necessitates not a passive endurance but an ongoing, aggressive battle for survival. This master narrative 'is a story of battlers, victims of huge forces,

<sup>44</sup> Ricklefs, 'The Asian Immigration Controversies', p. 41.

<sup>45</sup> *Age*, 20 March 1984, cited in Ricklefs, 'The Asian Immigration Controversies', p. 41.

<sup>46</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 3 April 1984, cited in Ricklefs, 'The Asian Immigration Controversies', p. 42.

<sup>47</sup> *ibid.*, p. 48.

<sup>48</sup> *ibid.*, p. 43.

<sup>49</sup> Curthoys, 'Entangled Histories'; 'Expulsion, Exodus and Exile'.

<sup>50</sup> Slotkin, *The Fatal Environment; Gunfighter Nation*.

<sup>51</sup> Atwood, *Survival*; Frye, *The Bush Garden*.

their heroism one of survival, in war as in peace. The frame-story begins with a tale of convict suffering, of pioneers who had to endure the harshest continent on earth, endless drought and flood ... near starvation ...<sup>52</sup> These narratives also extend to accounts of war, of being used as 'cannon fodder for the British military in World War One' and of chronic vulnerability as a continent to attacks from foreign nations.<sup>53</sup> One of the best known of the battler narratives is the Anzac legend, which emerged from the tragic deaths of thousands of Australian troops at Gallipoli in 1915. The Anzac legend has become one of Australia's most important founding myths, in which war is glorified as the proving ground for the Australian nation and national character, and death in war is upheld as the ultimate nationalistic sacrifice.<sup>54</sup> But this heroic victimisation also comes from within: Aborigines, too, are the aggressors, 'inflicting violence on the innocent settler and his family'.<sup>55</sup> And the landscape also victimises settlers and explorers. Australia's explorer-heroes – Burke and Wills, Edmund Kennedy, Leichhardt – are all individuals who died a heroic, mysterious death while exploring the continent, disappearing into the vast outback never to be found. In all, these master narratives of history reinforce the obligation, the ongoing imperative, to fight aggressively and defensively to protect one's rights, property and nation. Battling, in short, is an Australian imagined tradition.

These national themes and images pervade Hanson's rhetoric. She presents herself as an ordinary battler standing up to defend her nation. Her rhetoric is full of militaristic images of a nation under attack both from outside and within. In her 1997 speech at the launch of the One Nation party Hanson rallied her audience with a virtual call to arms: 'Australians can no longer afford the luxury of apathy. We must stand up. We must win this battle, or lose the war'. The One Nation Party, she claimed, represented 'a chance to stand against those who have betrayed our country, and would destroy our identity by forcing upon us the cultures of others ... if we fail ... we will lose our country forever, and be strangers in our own land ... Ladies and Gentlemen, who of you would not join this fight? Who of you would not stand up for your country?' She explicitly aligns her struggle with the heroic Anzac battlers of World War One: One Nation offers 'the chance to turn this country around, revitalise our industry, [and] restore our ANZAC spirit and our national pride'. She says: 'We must always remember the sacrifice of so many Australians who fought to save our country from outsiders who would have taken it. We must not now allow our country to be taken from within'.<sup>56</sup>

<sup>52</sup> Curthoys, 'Entangled Histories', p. 120.

<sup>53</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> Dennis et al., 'Anzac Legend'.

<sup>55</sup> Curthoys, 'Entangled Histories', p. 121.

<sup>56</sup> Pauline Hanson's speech to the One Nation Party launch, 11 April 1997, reprinted in 'Party Launch Speech', *Pauline Hanson's One Nation*, June 1998, pp. 3-4.

Similar images of nationhood and national history permeate Hanson's anti-native title rhetoric. She argues for the extinguishment of native title, the abolition of ATSIC, and the end of all special programs for indigenous people. These arguments are framed by a series of concerns having to do with a demographic and pseudo-military takeover of Australia from within. She expresses alarm at being demographically overwhelmed by a rising Aboriginal population: 'The Aboriginal population increased 33% from 1991-1996 while the rest of the population of Australia increased by only around 6%', she warned a crowd gathered at Longreach, Queensland in September 1998. At the same meeting she raised fears that Aboriginal corporations could potentially buy up pastoral properties in Queensland, engaging in a kind of economic takeover of the land and pastoral industry in that state: 'Most Australians are not aware the Indigenous Land Corporation will have the financial ability to transfer the ownership of Australia's pastoral leases to Aborigines ... by 2004 the Indigenous Land Fund will have received over \$1.2 Billion in taxpayers' funds ... Given the chance the Corporation could buy all the pastoral properties in Cape York in just one year. This taxpayer created fund could take only about thirty years or so to buy all the Pastoral Leases in Queensland'.<sup>57</sup> Significantly, Hanson envisions Aboriginal-run pastoral stations not as contributing in significant and important ways to the economy of the country, but somehow as threats to the nation's integrity. Along similar lines, Hanson claims that Queensland Labor and Coalition parties are in a conspiracy to create a separate, sovereign Aboriginal state. As evidence of an international conspiracy to this effect, she points her finger at the Canadian government and the new territory of Nunavut, which she incorrectly portrays as a separate, independent, 'race-based' state separate from Canada.<sup>58</sup> And she blames 'new class elites' for 'surrendering' Australia to indigenous Australians.<sup>59</sup>

While this kind of paranoid, militaristic rhetoric is also found in the extreme right-wing populist movements in North America, in Australia this rhetoric has a particular salience when placed alongside established foundational histories and images of nationhood. The success of One Nation during the mid- to late 1990s, in part, must be associated with its ability to appeal to these sentimental

<sup>57</sup> Pauline Hanson's speech at Longreach, 11 September 1998, from the One Nation website (<http://www.gwb.com.au/onenation/speeches/long.html>), October 1998.

<sup>58</sup> Pauline Hanson, speech to the Australian House of Representatives, 1 October 1997, as recorded in Hansard; also 'Hanson claims Aboriginal State conspiracy', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 3 June 1998. Nunavut, created in April 1999, and like every other province and territory in Canada, is headed by a government elected democratically by the majority vote of territorial residents, irrespective of ethnicity or 'race'. By virtue of the fact that the majority of Nunavut residents are indigenous, it can be said to be an 'indigenous' government, but this is subject to change should the demographic balance of indigenous/non-indigenous residents shift in the future.

<sup>59</sup> Pauline Hanson, cited in Bohill, 'For the Record', p. 74.

symbols of Australian identity and history and to tap into lingering fears about the tenuousness of the nation's security.

## Canada

Anti-native title arguments in Canada show some significant differences. As in Australia, indigenous people in Canada are often constructed as undeserving of 'special rights': they 'sponge' off government, they don't use the land they have, they are incapable of self-management – these are the common stereotypes. There are concerns that the settlement of Aboriginal land claims and the implementation of forms of Aboriginal self-government will result in 'race-based' territories with governments operating outside the context of the Canadian federation. Opposition to indigenous land claims is justified in terms of a defense of the principle Canadian values of equality, democracy, and individual rights. But while similar to the anti-native title arguments in Australia, Canadian opposition to indigenous claims is couched in particular images of Canadian national identity and history that convey an unshakeable conviction of the imagined Canadian traditions of benevolence and generosity.

Popular histories in Canada, both at the national and local level, construct the frontier expansion as a series of benevolent extensions of Euro-Canadian colonial authority. This is quite unlike either American frontier narratives, where conquest is portrayed as a result of violence, or Australian versions, where – when settlement has been successful – indigenous peoples are either completely erased from the landscape or, as in the case of the Kalkadoon of north-western Queensland, have died a heroic, Anzac-like death in the face of Australian colonial expansion.<sup>60</sup> In Canadian popular narratives, when settlers are not portrayed in a kind of passive, frozen state surrounded by a hostile wilderness (as Atwood describes), the successful colonisation of the frontier is imagined as being achieved through a process of 'conquest through benevolence': through Aboriginal peoples' willing subordination and 'loyalty' to the paternalistic care of government agents, missionaries and settlers.<sup>61</sup> Canadian frontier heroes are not usually the Indian fighters of American versions; in fact, popular historians often deny the occurrence of overt Aboriginal resistance. Instead, the frontier heroes are the Mounties, the enforcers of law and order. Pierre Berton, Canada's foremost popular historian, has described the North West Mounted Police as 'civil servants and social workers' whose paternalistic qualities were appreciated by the Indians, who called the Mountie 'father'.<sup>62</sup> This narrative of 'conquest through benevolence' has permeated Canadian stories of national identity and history for over a century. It has translated into a heavily paternalistic Indian

<sup>60</sup> For example, Armstrong, *The Kalkadoons*; Grassby and Hill, *Six Australian Battlefields*.

<sup>61</sup> Furniss, *The Burden of History*, pp. 53-78.

<sup>62</sup> Berton, *Why We Act Like Canadians*, pp. 28-32.

Affairs policy of coercive power masked as benevolent guidance, and a set of paternalistic attitudes among non-Aboriginal Canadians in which racism is masked in a language of benevolence and good will.<sup>63</sup> This narrative of benevolence is echoed in the widespread belief, often heard, that in Canada 'we have treated our Aboriginal people well'.

This narrative of Canadian benevolence and generosity frames much of the anti-native title discourse today. For example, in contrast to Australian discourse, in which governments are accused of being traitorous and surrendering the country to Aborigines, in Canada governments are accused of being overly generous to Aboriginal people. Land claims are constructed as yet another massive government 'giveaway' to Aboriginal people – an excessive benevolence.

These themes of Canadian benevolence and government over-generosity infuse the anti land-claims rhetoric of the Reform Party (now known as the Canadian Reform Conservative Alliance), the conservative populist party that could be described as the Canadian version of Australia's One Nation. Like One Nation, the Reform Party is opposed to the recognition of special Aboriginal rights, arguing that 'all Canadians are equal', and that treaties would perpetuate 'racial' divisions among Canadians. The Reform Party opposes land claims settlements in the Western Arctic and Yukon because 'the generosity of the land claim agreements was excessive'.<sup>64</sup> The Reform Party's Aboriginal Affairs critic, Mike Scott, evoking a self-image of a benevolent parent to Canada's indigenous people, has stated that land claims settlements are not in the best interests of Aboriginal people. British Columbia's resource economy would be destroyed by land claims settlements, he argues. 'As the least well off British Columbians, Indians more than anyone will be harmed if the government makes deals that help destroy the economy'.<sup>65</sup> Another Reform party member has stated: 'The real villains [*sic*] [in the land claims movement] are the federal and provincial governments and their bureaucrats. Since 1982, these culprits have been leading the native people to expect that their wish lists would be fulfilled, that indeed Canada's native people have a right to expect preferential treatment.'<sup>66</sup> Thus, the land claims movement is a result of naïve Aboriginal 'children' being misled by overly generous, paternalistic governments.

This image of excessive government paternalism is even more explicit in the arguments of Mel Smith, a key Reform party supporter and recent author of a book on the land claims issue in British Columbia.<sup>67</sup> Smith argues that the British

<sup>63</sup> Furniss, *The Burden of History*.

<sup>64</sup> 'Native Land Claims: What's Going On', informational poster circulated by the Reform Party of Canada, 1995.

<sup>65</sup> Mike Scott, Town Hall Public Meeting in Williams Lake, B.C., March 1995, cited in Furniss, *The Burden of History*, p. 145.

<sup>66</sup> 'Only One Law for Canadian People', Williams Lake *Tribune*, 1 August 1995, A5.

<sup>67</sup> Smith, *Our Home or Native Land?*

Columbia government has addressed the native title question by establishing Indian reserves. '70% of the reserves in Canada are in British Columbia! It is a myth to say the government has not met its obligations to the Indians!'<sup>68</sup> Of course, colonial officials did not establish reserves to address Aboriginal title, but to protect settlers from growing threats of violence from indigenous peoples whose lands they were taking. Further, many of the reserves in British Columbia, in contrast with the large prairie treaty lands, are only a few acres in size – the number of reserves does not equate with the size of reserves. These facts, however, are obscured in Smith's rhetoric of generosity. The concept of Aboriginal self-government, now recognised and supported by the federal government, 'causes all sorts of problems, because it raises expectations, it causes the Native people, the leadership, to feel that they have their own rights', Smith suggests.<sup>69</sup>

These images of Canadian national identity and benevolence are also encountered in rural debates. For example, one writer to a rural B.C. community paper stated: 'Everyone agrees that land claims should be settled, but how? How many years have we been pouring funds into this abyss [reserve communities]? It apparently has done the natives on the reserves no good at all ... Where has this money gone? The native people of Canada should be the best dressed, the best housed, the best educated people in the world!'<sup>70</sup> Another writer similarly drew on the images of Canadian benevolence and Aboriginal ingratitude:

There's a lot of concern over the land claims issues ... Who and what is really behind this, as we get along well with the native Indians? They now have warm houses to live in, warm clothing to wear, education privileges, and much more [than] before the white people came. Canadians are nice people and try to give everyone a fair chance. Some are taking advantage of this goodness.<sup>71</sup>

The images of history, of identity and of the nature of Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal relations contained within such anti-land claims rhetoric all resonate with dominant assumptions of Canadian identity and national history. The Canadian self-image of benevolent paternalism is juxtaposed to the image of a now-excessive government generosity and the passive, childlike Indian who is being misled into false expectations of their Aboriginal rights by sympathetic governments.

<sup>68</sup> Mel Smith, Reform Party Town Hall Meeting, Williams Lake B.C., March 1995, cited in Furniss, *The Burden of History*, pp. 143-44.

<sup>69</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>70</sup> Letter to the Editor, Williams Lake *Tribune*, 24 November 1994, A5.

<sup>71</sup> Letter to the Editor, Williams Lake *Tribune*, 31 March 1994, A5.



## Conclusion

How might this comparative perspective help us to understand how Australian history, indigenous/settler relations, and the northern 'frontier' have been imagined? To me, what is most striking about Australia is the deep sense that conquest has never, truly been achieved. In responding to the native title movement, opponents clearly convey a deep sense of pervasive victimisation. During the recent Wik debate over the existence of native rights on pastoral leases, pastoralists in Queensland were reported to be 'taking up arms' to defend themselves against an anticipated indigenous attack.<sup>72</sup> As previously mentioned, Pauline Hanson herself has expressed concern that indigenous corporations in Queensland were buying up pastoral properties and engaging in a kind of economic takeover of the country. There is, in short, a lingering culture of terror in Australia – a constructed fear of indigenous reprisal – that permeates much of the public opposition to the native title movement.

This contrasts significantly with public discourse in Canada. To be sure, in Canada there are the armed indigenous blockades, occupations, and so on. Such protests and blockades have become even more frequent through the 1990s as land claims remain unresolved and a younger indigenous population becomes increasingly impatient with government intransigence over the land question. There certainly are unresolved fears of indigenous reprisals against non-indigenous settlers and governments.<sup>73</sup> Yet public opposition to Aboriginal land claims is less often characterised by fear than it is by a paternalistic smugness in which governments are criticised for being excessively 'generous' to indigenous peoples, and politicians and the police both are criticised for 'putting up' with acts of indigenous 'disobedience', again evoking the image of indigenous children getting away with bad behaviour.

I don't mean to oversimplify the kinds of nationalist, historical narratives in either Canada or Australia, narratives which are much more complex, fluid and variable than I've portrayed here. I haven't traced at length, for example, how supporters of the native title movement draw upon particular images of national culture and history to support their cause. But these dominant narratives do

<sup>72</sup> 'Whites would quit the north', *Sunday Times*, 7 December 1997; 'Pastoralists taking up arms, says MP', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 5 December 1997.

<sup>73</sup> In my work in the British Columbia interior I have on occasion heard rural Euro-Canadians express fears that the local indigenous peoples were 'stockpiling arms' for a future uprising against local non-Aboriginal residents. Recently an RCMP report similarly claimed that militant Aboriginal people were 'stockpiling weapons' such as high-powered rifles, machine guns, and anti-tank weapons ('First Nations deny stockpiling weapons', *Vancouver Sun*, 28 February 1999.). This report must be viewed in the context of the 1990 Oka confrontation, in which armed members of the Mohawk nation barricaded a highway near Oka, Quebec to protect a sacred site from encroachment and to protest government inactivity on their land claims. The Canadian government responded to the Mohawk blockade by sending in the Canadian army, complete with armoured tanks and machine-gunned soldiers, to dismantle the blockade, an action that focused national attention and sparked critical public debate over the state of Aboriginal/government relations.

seem to constrain the possibilities of public discourse. For example, in Australia Henry Reynolds has played a critical role in bringing these historical questions to the attention of the general public, and has been one of the most popular and effective advocates for native title. Yet he has captured public attention not by challenging, but by modifying dominant historical narratives. Reynolds attempts to secure some positive public space for Aboriginality by constructing Aboriginal people as 'black pioneers' who contributed to the building of the Australian nation, thus retaining the image of pioneering progress that is central to the frontier myth.<sup>74</sup>

What influence might these narratives of victimisation, of a lack of faith in the completion of colonisation, have on portrayals of north Australia and the northern 'frontier'? Deborah Bird Rose has identified these themes in north Australian pastoralists' sense of relationship to the northern landscape. While pastoralists have a deep love for the country they have 'conquered' and now inhabit, they nevertheless feel a deep sense of their transience in that country. Pastoralists, Rose suggests, are living in a moment of perpetual liminality, a 'Ground Zero' in the colonial moment, unable to imagine the survival of the pastoral lifestyle and their future generations in those regions.<sup>75</sup>

While local narratives in north Australia resonate with the more general victimisation narratives elsewhere, these narratives are also strongly shaped by local conditions. In part, the uncertainties of northern pastoralists are linked to local economic conditions: the difficulties of the pastoral industry in the north, the insecurity over pastoral leases, and so on. Quite in contrast are the public histories found in the north-western Queensland city of Mount Isa, where the mining industry has been booming since the 1950s, has brought a level of almost unprecedented wealth to local workers, and has only in the last few years begun to decline. Here the histories encountered in the public spaces around town – tourism displays, the city's historical festivals, popular books, magazine and newspaper articles – all are proud, brash, confident, and arrogant. They speak of a linearity of history, of successful colonisation, of the 'disappearance' of local indigenous tribes (and thus the resolution of any outstanding historical questions concerning native title), and of a future of unlimited progress and prosperity for all.<sup>76</sup>

Thus both local factors and national traditions contribute to the process of imagining the north Australian 'frontier'. But this process also reflects similarities with other settler-colonial societies. In both Canada and Australia, the cultural problematic inherent to settler societies – being newcomers in a land once controlled by indigenous peoples – requires stories legitimizing arrival,

<sup>74</sup> Reynolds, *With the White People*.

<sup>75</sup> Rose, 'The Year Zero and the North Australian Frontier'.

<sup>76</sup> Furniss, 'Timeline History and the Anzac Myth'.

occupation, dispossession, and continued domination of indigenous peoples. And in both countries, the 'frontier' – the early process of encounter between colonists and the new land, its unknown territories, its indigenous peoples – retains its salience as a key source of symbols for the ongoing construction of official histories and national identities.

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