

## *How Sorry Can We Be?*

**I**n 1897 John Farrell, editor of the *Sydney Daily Telegraph*, wrote a poem to mark Queen Victoria's jubilee and sent it to Rudyard Kipling, hoping for praise and endorsement. Kipling lighted on the passage in which Farrell regretted the bloody excesses of the empire's conquests and took Farrell to task for his easy moralism. He declared:

A man might just as well accuse his father of a taste in fornication  
(citing his own birth as an instance) as a white man mourn over his  
land's savagery in the past.

The critic only exists because of the deed he criticises. Let us call this the hard realist view of Australia's origins. It avers that it is morally impossible for settler Australians to regret or apologise for the conquest on which colonial Australia was built. It is the view that I share.

No-one has been putting this view publicly in the recent history wars over the extent of frontier violence. Keith Windschuttle, rightly sensing that accounts of violence towards the Aborigines have been used to question the legitimacy of the nation, argued not that violence was inevitable but that its extent had been grossly exaggerated. In the case of Tasmania, on which he has produced the first of a promised series of books, he concludes that only 118 Aborigines were killed (later increased to 120). To his mind, with this low figure, he has rescued the reputation of the British empire and its successor settler nation from their detractors. Compared with the Spanish in the new world, the British in Australia, he says, were restrained by Christian

and Enlightenment values in their dealings with the indigenous inhabitants. Tasmania 'was the least violent of all European encounters in the New World'.

With his other critics, I believe that Windschuttle has a misplaced faith in the documents he uses as giving a complete account of what was happening on the frontier. The documents from which he draws the figure of 118 dead themselves speak of terrible deeds being committed in the woods, which by design were leaving no records. But even if Windschuttle were right about the number of those killed by direct violence, he cannot deny that forty years after the European settlement, all the Tasmanian Aborigines had either perished or had been removed to offshore islands. Empires even good empires believe in conquest and by any standards this was a complete and rapid expropriation. A people and their way of life had been destroyed. Compared to the starkness of that fact, how many had been directly killed by settler violence seems a matter of lesser consequence.

Again with his other critics (and one or two supporters) I am surprised at Windschuttle's lack of sympathy for the plight of the dispossessed Aborigines. A position of hard realism about the nation resting on conquest certainly does not require that we abandon sympathy for Aborigines as fellow humans. We must understand what Aborigines have experienced since 1788 if any policy-making in Aboriginal affairs is to be effective.

In the course of his argument Windschuttle claimed that Aborigines had no attachment to the land and that in attacking the settlers they were not defending their territory, still less conducting a war; they were simply wanting to acquire the settlers' goods. This was plunder and murder merely. Windschuttle's critics suspected that he was intent on demolishing the claim that present-day Aborigines had to the land or to compensation. So they thought it important not only to destroy Windschuttle's claims about land and resistance but also the symbolic heart of the book: the fewness of the deliberate deaths. There was much argument about the numbers.

At the Melbourne Writers Festival in August 2003 Windschuttle agreed to a debate with Robert Manne, who had edited a book of essays designed to demolish Windschuttle's Tasmanian book. I was in the

chair. Among his other criticisms, Manne pressed Windschuttle hard on the numbers: even given his own methodology, could he be sure that Aborigines injured in a battle did not later die of their wounds? Windschuttle did concede that this was possible.

In question time one woman in the audience declared that she was sick of the argument about numbers. Even one death, she said, was one too many. This remark was met with spontaneous applause, which though not universal was nevertheless revealing. The woman and those who applauded believe that it was possible to dispossess the Aborigines without bloodshed. The woman did not speak of dispossession but she and her supporters were located in the Malthouse Theatre which stands on land that formerly belonged to Wurundjeri. Let us label this the liberal fantasy view of our origins. It avers that the conquest could have been done nicely. This view is quite widespread and influential and warrants close examination.

Liberal fantasy is prominent in the judgments given in the *Mabo* case in the High Court. The Court found that since 1788 the common law had not been properly interpreted: it should have respected the Aborigines' rights in their land. The Court did not rule that the invasion itself was illegitimate. On the contrary, it legitimised the invasion by declaring that the British Crown's proclamation of sovereignty over Australia could not be questioned in an Australian court. The error of the Crown and the courts was to assume that sovereignty meant that Aborigines could be summarily dispossessed of their lands. Justices Deane and Gaudron in a famous passage said this:

The acts and events by which that dispossession in legal theory was carried into practical effect constitute the darkest aspect of the history of this nation. The nation as a whole must remain diminished unless and until there is an acknowledgment of, and retreat from, those past injustices.

This envisages that the nation could have come into being without a dark past. The darkness is only an 'aspect' of our history; there could have been a nation without it. But even if the law had been as the High Court now declares it should have been, the desire of the white invaders

for Aboriginal lands would have been no less. The clash between Aboriginal hunting and gathering and European pastoral pursuits would have been as stark. What would have happened if the Aborigines on being fully appraised of the invaders' intentions had refused to negotiate any of their land away? – they would have been *forced* to negotiate. Even if each tribe had been persuaded to yield half their land, Aborigines would still have regarded the invaders' sheep as fair game and white shepherds would have misunderstood what was involved in their acceptance of Aboriginal women – two potent sources of conflict in the world as it really happened. It is very hard to envisage a settlement history without violence. It is a great conceit on the part of these two judges to think that a difference in the law could have tamed the force of European colonialism and given us a history with no dark aspects. From all that we now know of what the land meant to the Aborigines, they would not have yielded it without a fight. The judges insult them by thinking that it could have all happened peacefully.

From 1823 the law in the United States on Indian land was as the High Court says it should have been in regard to Aboriginal land in Australia. The United States had sovereign control over the whole landmass, but the Indians had the right of occupancy over their lands until it was extinguished. Indian land could officially only be yielded up by treaty. But the Indians were not free to make or not make treaties. They were pressured into treaty-making after they had been defeated in battle or in an attempt to save some of their lands from the onrush of the settlers, who did not wait for official sanction before pressing into Indian country. Under these treaties Indians in the east had to agree to be moved westward and the Indians in the west were confined to reservations. The treaties provided that on the reservations they should be supported in money or goods, but the Indian agents frequently robbed them of their due. Their reservations were always subject to incursions by settlers. If the Indians fought back, this was an 'uprising' that the US army would savagely suppress. The area of the reservations was regularly reduced and from 1887 reduced even further by the policy of allotting farm-size plots to each Indian family and opening the rest to the settlers. The process of Americanisation of the Indians required that children be forcibly removed from their parents and placed in

boarding houses. The recognition of an Indian right in land did not save the United States from a 'dark aspect' of its history.

One might have thought that Henry Reynolds, the author of the classic work on Aboriginal resistance, *The Other Side of the Frontier*, would be proof against the liberal fantasy. Yet it sustains one of his later books *This whispering in our hearts*, which deals with those few colonists who opposed the disruption and destruction of Aboriginal society. One or two of these dissenters thought the Aborigines could be saved only if the colonists left. Most thought that colonisation could and should proceed by 'purchase, treaty and negotiation'. This view Reynolds endorses without considering how this process would have been implemented and what difference it would have made. The dissenters were all opposed to punitive expeditions. Reynolds himself is very definite that punitive expeditions were 'indiscriminate and disproportionate violence'. So the historian who celebrated Aboriginal resistance and wanted their battles to protect their lands honoured in the War Memorial now thinks that milder measures – a bit of deft police work, perhaps – would have been enough to make the Aborigines give up the fight.

The liberal fantasy has a strong hold on Kate Grenville, one of the best of our fiction writers. Her latest book *The Secret River* deals with the European settlement along the Hawkesbury River north of Sydney. The chief character is loosely based on one of her ancestors, a waterman on the Thames who was transported for thieving. In the modern way she has talked and written a lot about her project and hence revealed the impulses that drive her. She told the ABC:

You want to go back 200 years and say to the settlers, 'Look, this is how the Aborigines are,' and to the Aborigines, 'Look, this is why settlers are behaving the way they are. Let's understand this. There's no need for all this brutality.'

Here is the liberal faith that conflict comes from misunderstanding. Actually, if Aborigines had earlier understood the settlers' intentions there would have been more violence and sooner. The settlers were fortunate in that the Aborigines at first welcomed them or avoided them or attempted to accommodate them.

Grenville wants there to have been peace, but she knows why there was war. In the book she gives a good account of the dynamics of conflict. Her character is a good man who does not want to do the Aborigines harm, but in his dealings with them on his Hawkesbury farm he is perplexed, fearful and finally angry and desperate. He is a very good man, amazingly sensitive for an illiterate waterman brought up in a hard world. He also appears to have read the modern textbook accounts on Aboriginal society. So he realises that 'the blacks were farmers no less than the white men' and that hunting and gathering allowed plenty of time for 'sitting by their fires and laughing and stroking the chubby limbs of their babies'. On one occasion he beats his son for avoiding work and playing with the Aborigines. When the son remains defiant, he says, 'Do I got to get the belt out again, lad?' But his anger soon leaves him. On the transport ship he had learnt that repeated floggings did not work. He says to the boy 'Just joking, lad. I beat you once that were enough.' *Just joking?* At what date did a parent first say that after threatening to discipline a child?: try the 1950s in the United States.

Kate Grenville ponders what she would have done on the frontier and what sort of person that would have made her. The leading character in her novel is not an eighteenth-century waterman at all; it is herself. And so it is no surprise that the waterman, having joined in a massacre of the Aborigines that ends their harassment of the settlers, finds that the land he has possessed gives him no comfort. This is clearly meant as a parable of the nation.

Worrying over the conquest; wishing it were peaceful; feeling that somehow it has to be rectified if settler Australia is to be at peace with itself: these are the products of the liberal imagination. Its decency knows no bounds or thought. *Even one death is one too many.* This mindset has perverted Aboriginal policy over the last thirty years so that it has not been dealing with Aborigines as they are or may be and it raises expectations that cannot be met. The *Mabo* judgment was a great offender in this. Having denounced settler atrocity and called for a retreat from past injustices, it then proceeded to legitimise the invasion and declared that native title had been extinguished on all freehold and leasehold land.

Kate Grenville thinks that novelists, better than historians, can get into the heart and mind of past people. Depends on the novelist – and the historian. Between Kate Grenville and the historian Inga Clendinnen there is no contest. In her study of the first years at Sydney Cove, Clendinnen is not projecting herself back into the past; she knows that these people, settlers and Aborigines, are very different from herself. You need to work hard to understand them. One of the several novelities of *Dancing with Strangers* is Clendinnen's characterisation of the Aborigines as warriors and her cool appraisal of how violence worked in their society. When Governor Phillip orders the first punitive expedition against the Aborigines, she does not hasten to condemn him; she thinks he has correctly divined the sort of retribution Aborigines will understand. The expedition failed to find any Aborigines – which Clendinnen, not altogether convincingly, claims is what Phillip intended, reckoning that the threat of retribution would be enough.

Grenville is appalled by the plans for this punitive expedition. Aboriginal heads were to be cut off and brought back in bags. Her modern sensibility reels at this hacking at bone and muscle. Her historical enquiries into violence have obviously not been extensive. Europeans were still hanging, drawing and quartering their own when Sydney was founded. Grenville is rather coy about Aboriginal violence. We see the results as visited on the settlers but not Aborigines performing it. The settlers on the Hawkesbury follow what Aborigines are doing elsewhere through the pages of the *Sydney Gazette* and we are encouraged to think that Aboriginal violence is to some extent a media beat-up. However, the climactic European massacre of the Aborigines is rendered in close-up grisly detail.

The liberal imagination, appalled at European violence on the frontier, tends to cast the Aborigines as victims merely and not fine practitioners of violence themselves. Violence was more central to their society since its practice was not allotted to a professional caste of soldiers; all adult males were warriors. Aboriginal warfare was endemic, usually with a small number of deaths, but occasionally Aborigines massacred each other. This is an account based on reports by the perpetrators:

Spears and boomerangs flew with deadly aim. Within a matter of minutes Ltjabakuk and his men were lying lifeless in their blood at their brush shelters. Then the warriors turned their murderous attention to the women and older children, and either speared or clubbed them to death. Finally ... they broke the limbs of the infants, leaving them to die 'natural deaths'.

The writer is T. G. H. Strehlow, who grew up with the Aranda of the Centre. His life work was to record and translate their songs. Of their warrior songs he wrote that the 'unbridled expression of blood-lust was relished by old and young'.

Kate Grenville cannot imagine how she would have behaved on the Hawkesbury frontier because, unlike the Hawkesbury settlers, she does not believe in savagery, European superiority and conquest. The pioneer settlers are not ourselves. Nor are the Aborigines whom the pioneers encountered the Aborigines of today. Settler Australians no longer hang and flog offenders or colonise other countries. Aboriginal Australians no longer abandon their old, kill their superfluous young and levy war against their neighbours. We are all a long way from 1788.

There is literally no place for settler Australians to stand to decry the conquest of this country. It all belonged to the Aborigines. The only honest approach is to recognise the conquest as conquest and not to give any utilitarian defence of it – like that the land under European control was able to provide food and fibre to the rest of the world, a view which Geoffrey Blainey advances. In the European world of the late eighteenth century acquiring new territory was perfectly legitimate; what dispute there was concerned the treatment of the people already there. An heroic moralist of today may say that the European conquests were wrong and attempt the impossibility of imagining world history without conquest. Better, if you must speak of right and wrong, to say that according to their lights the settlers were right to invade and the Aborigines were right to resist them. It is our common fate to live with the consequences of that conjunction.



The consequences were more varied than is commonly imagined. Here is a thumb-nail sketch of race relations since 1788, the work of an Aboriginal radical which would be assented to – except perhaps for the Nazi comparison – by many progressively-minded settler Australians.

When white men arrived in this country, they shot the blacks, poisoned their waterholes, murdered them, left, right and centre. Those that were left were rounded up like dogs and cattle and stuck in these places called Aboriginal reserves, which were nothing less than concentration camps. And there they stayed until very recently.

It is correct that there were two attacks on the Aborigines, but wrong to imply that the second followed hard on the first. After the first attack – the taking of the land and the crushing of resistance – the Aborigines were more or less left alone. The time between the two attacks was as much as a hundred years in the lands settled first in New South Wales.

The Aborigines, depleted in numbers more by disease than violence, remained on their own land. Unlike the American Indians they did not have to be put on reserves to stop their resistance. Many took work in the pastoral industry, which until 1900 was much more important than farming and sat more lightly on the land. The boss who hired them might well a few years previously have been shooting at them. The more remote the property, the more reliant was the pastoralist on Aboriginal labour and the less likely the Aborigines were to be paid wages. But where the white presence was slight Aborigines could retain more of their traditional life. As Ann McGrath wrote in *Born in the Cattle*, we can exaggerate the significance of the settlers to the Aborigines, ruthless and exploitative though the settlers were. As well as doing the regular work on the pastoral stations, Aborigines became drovers and shearers. The Shearers Union (later the AWU) was fanatical in its opposition to Chinese labour but allowed Aborigines (and Maoris) to be members. There were some reserves and missions, more important as refuges to the Aborigines where settlement was denser, but Aborigines were not confined to them; they were free to come and go.

Across the countryside Aborigines remained a presence. Some were ruined by drink and survived by begging and scrounging. Most made their own living and the good workers gained reputation and respect. On the missions Aborigines could be living in cottages as good or better than those of the working class. On the pastoral stations and near the towns they lived in humpies from which they might emerge in suits and hats. Aborigines were local notables and the giving of King plates to 'chiefs' continued and the deaths of the last of the tribe were commemorated. The tide of general opinion was becoming more hostile towards the Aborigines as an inferior race, but settlers on the land had their experience of particular people to temper their attitudes.

Aborigines of the first generation after contact have consistently been described as a mild, uncomplaining, generous people. This seems a puzzle: why would defeated warriors display these characteristics? In his Boyer Lectures W. E. H. Stanner, the great anthropologist, thought the mildness was a sort of anomie induced by homelessness, powerlessness, poverty and confusion. I think his essay on 'The Dreaming' provides a better explanation: the cosmology of the Aborigines cannot be destroyed by any disruptions in their life here and now. It is beyond time and circumstance. This attachment to what is unchanging meant that Aborigines were less inclined to quarrel with pain, sorrow and sadness. Their stoicism we may take to be an aspect of character, but as with the original Stoics it had its basis in philosophy.

After their homelands were taken from them, the Aborigines were, in the terms of the society that had overwhelmed them, a marginalised people, but in their own understanding they were, in a double sense, not a displaced people: they were on their own territory and what gave ultimate meaning to their life still continued. Their 'sense of oneness with Eternity', in Strehlow's words, 'made them more kindly, tolerant and helpful towards their human fellows everywhere'.

In this way we can understand the lack of resentment towards the settlers and the willingness to be of service to them. This is celebrated in the many stories of Aboriginal trackers finding lost children in the bush. Someone rides for the tracker who briefly becomes the leader and instructor of the settlers before returning to the humpy from which he was fetched. The stories having become legendary are a continuing

reminder of the laissez-faire times between the first and second attack on the Aborigines.

The second attack began in the decades around 1900. The Aborigines presented no new problem to white society except that they continued to exist. By processes that had little to do with the Aborigines, the new nation had formed its ideals in and through the slogan White Australia. Once the nation had given itself that racial identity, the Aborigines became an anomaly. Much indulgence had been shown to the Aborigines in the nineteenth century because they were expected to die out; now there were growing numbers of mixed-blood people. The white nation seemed likely to have a permanent group of people of 'inferior' blood. Two solutions were adopted. In the more closely settled areas part-Aborigines were to be separated from their full-blood kin and encouraged to disappear into the wider community. This involved the shrinking and destruction of the Aboriginal communities on the reserves and missions and the removal of children from their parents. Where Aboriginal populations were larger they were to be confined on reserves (as far as was compatible with the need for their labour) and their interbreeding with whites forbidden. To control, confine and manage Aborigines in this way their civil rights had to be removed.

The second attack on the Aborigines disturbs me much more than the first. I am not shocked at a settler riding out to shoot Aborigines. He acted in hot blood to protect what was close to him, the lives of himself and his workers and the survival of his highly risky enterprise. Nor am I shocked that settlers and their men sometimes rode out together hoping to kill enough Aborigines to give themselves finally the security they craved. But I cannot be calm at police arriving at settled communities to drag children away from their mothers. This was cold-blooded cruelty planned by a distant Bureau in pursuit of the ideal of racial purity. Humankind has been very inventive in its cruelty, but cruelty of this sort did not appear until the early twentieth century. We are still struggling to come to terms with it.

Concern for racial purity was then general in European civilisation; it had a peculiar intensity here because Australia happened to form its national ideal when racism was at its peak and it had experienced and disliked migration from Asia. Its ideals of a progressive, egalitarian

and harmonious society became fully mixed with the racial poison. Now that they have been untangled the nation should apologise to those that suffered – particularly to children forcibly taken from caring parents. I believe that more settler Australians would be ready to acknowledge this wrong and apologise for it if the proponents of apology did not urge apologies for everything.

So why does the second attack on the Aborigines warrant an apology and the first one not? Though the High Court judges in *Mabo* spoke of the Australian nation expropriating the Aborigines, this is not so. The settlers were English, Irish and Scots who invaded Aboriginal lands with the sanction of the British state. Only subsequently was the Australian nation formed by those settlers and their children. It is true that the nation was only made possible by this expropriation, which is why I consider it cannot be apologised for. Some might be tempted to point the finger at the British, but settler Australians are the beneficiaries of their deeds. The second attack on the Aborigines was an attack by the Australian nation (though the agents were the various state governments) in pursuit of a national ideal. I accept what Rai Gaita has argued that if a nation can feel pride at its past achievements it can properly feel shame (though not guilt) for its past misdeeds. Forcibly removing Aboriginal children was undoubtedly a misdeed. What finally makes the case for apology compelling in this instance is that some of the victims are still alive.

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Civil and political rights were rapidly restored to Aborigines from the 1950s. Settler Australians showed their willingness to see Aborigines become equal citizens by the overwhelming assent they gave to the 1967 constitutional amendment. But just at this point Aboriginal policy took a new separatist turn. The new policy proposals were for self-determination, land rights, a treaty, even Aboriginal sovereignty. These were the fruits of liberal fantasy conjoined with Aboriginal radicalism, which fed on each other.

The liberal fantasy is that the conquest would have been acceptable had there been recognition of the land rights of traditional owners and negotiation with them. Hence the most urgent need of policy is to

rectify these omissions which are the source of all our ills. But a treaty with the Aborigines would not be with a traditional grouping. The traditional groups numbered about 500 tribes, only a few of which survive. The Aborigines are a group formed since the conquest from those tribespeople and their descendants who had the common experience of oppression and exclusion at the hand of Europeans. The failure of 1788 is to be rectified by dealing with a group that did not exist in 1788.

In the 1950s and 1960s, when assimilation and integration was the policy, differences between Aborigines were acknowledged. Some Aborigines, chiefly of mixed blood, were already part of the wider society. Their problems were not that different from those of the white underclass with whom they frequently intermarried. In remote Australia there were Aborigines living something like a traditional life who were to be induced or encouraged over time to move into settler society. But with the new policies of separatism, the Aborigines were regarded as a single group and whatever characteristics were ascribed to traditional Aborigines, were true for them all. That is, Aborigines wherever located and however distant from a full-blood ancestor, were considered to possess, and may well have come to believe that they did possess, traditional ties to land and a deep spirituality.

William Cooper, the pioneer leader of Aboriginal protest in the 1930s, referred to himself and his supporters as 'the *descendants* of the original owners of the land'. Now all Aborigines were simply the original owners of the land. The politics of identity eroded history.

The High Court in *Mabo* encouraged all Aborigines to think that they had been deprived of their land rights, but it indicated that traditional ties would have to be demonstrated still to exist for a claim to land under native title to be established. Many non-traditional groups attempted to present themselves as having traditional ties to land. An early indication that these claims were spurious was the ferocious battles between Aborigines over who constituted the groups and over what land they had a claim. After millions of dollars of public money had been spent on lawyers' fees, the Federal Court and then the High Court ruled that the Yorta Yorta in Victoria no longer had traditional ties to their land; they had been washed away in the tide of history. No other decision could have been reached, but the Yorta Yorta now have a

grievance that they did not have before policy departed from need and all Aborigines were encouraged to think of themselves as traditional.

The *Mabo* decision and the *Native Title Act* which followed might be considered a treaty with Aborigines who still have traditional ties with the land. But proponents of a treaty do not regard it as such and the demand for a treaty with 'the Aborigines' continues. There are suggestions that a treaty should confer particular rights and privileges on Aborigines and provide them with compensation. The immediate difficulty with such a proposal would be to define who the Aborigines are.

An official definition already exists. It has three parts. An Aborigine has (1) to be a person of Aboriginal descent, with no particular proportion of this ancestry stipulated (2) to identify as an Aborigine, and (3) to be accepted by other Aborigines as an Aborigine. This definition is appropriately loose. Aboriginal communities in the more settled parts of the country have been very open and accepting.

But this looseness is now being exploited. People are claiming to be Aborigines partly in order to qualify for the benefits and opportunities specially provided for Aborigines. Tasmania is the state in which the number of Aborigines is rising most rapidly. Dr Cassandra Pybus, who knows the state and its records well, estimates that three-quarters of the people now identifying as Aborigines do not have an Aboriginal ancestor.

In 1997 Michael Mansell, the Aboriginal leader in Tasmania, brought an action in the federal court to challenge the right of eleven people to stand as candidates for the now defunct national Aboriginal parliament, ATSIC. He claimed they were not Aborigines. The judge was plainly unhappy at having to examine lines of descent; he was prepared to give the benefit of the doubt to people who had a strong family tradition that there was an Aboriginal ancestor. He excluded only two of the eleven. He said that today identity is much more social than genetic. In effect he relaxed an already loose definition. This might not matter too much when the issue is standing for ATSIC, but if under a treaty a class of people with special legal rights was being defined, this looseness would be unacceptable.

Cassandra Pybus, who gave evidence in this case, is sure that some people accepted by the judge have no Aboriginal ancestor. All their

ancestors were settlers. The descendants of those who shot the Aborigines and took their land are now receiving benefits earmarked for Aborigines.

Many people do not recognise how well integrated many Aborigines are. When they think of Aborigines they think of tribal people in the outback, not people who have been living in the suburbs for three generations. In their partnering the Aborigines of the cities and towns are a less cohesive group than the Greeks in Australia or the Jews. A majority of Aborigines have partners who are not Aborigines.

Consider this household. The husband is an Aborigine of mixed descent; one of his four grandparents was Aboriginal. His wife is of English, Scots, Irish and Italian descent. Their oldest daughter in her late teens becomes interested in her Aboriginal heritage. Her siblings show no interest. She declares that she is an Aborigine and seeks out other Aborigines. There can be no objection to this; it is a free country. But is it seriously proposed that by treaty she should officially be declared indigenous, that she acquire special rights, and that she be given compensation for the loss of her ancestral land, language and culture? That this notion is entertained shows how far policy has departed from an assessment of need.

A treaty has been criticised as divisive. It certainly would be and in a more profound sense than is commonly realised. The division and the bitterness would begin with the act of defining who the Aborigines are. It would give members of the same family a different status.

In the 1980s the Hawke Labor government contemplated and then abandoned the idea of a treaty. Instead it proposed a process of Reconciliation which would begin in 1991 and be completed in time for the centenary of federation in 2001. Liberal fantasy was again at work. The premise of Reconciliation was that nothing significant had so far been done to right past wrongs and yet complete harmony was within close reach.

Reconciliation as a process was borrowed from societies where two groups had been at loggerheads if not at war. In Australia Aborigines had regained their civil and political rights thirty years previously; they enjoyed a large measure of goodwill from the settler Australians and huge sums of public money had been spent on their welfare and

advancement. Aboriginal art and dance were widely appreciated; Aboriginal sportspeople were honoured. Traditional Aborigines had acquired the rights over their land. Assimilation and integration of other Aborigines – though those names could not be breathed – were proceeding rapidly. Intermarriage was high and increasing. And yet Reconciliation presented Australia as a fundamentally divided society. We were compared to South Africa or the Middle-Eastern conflict between Jews and Palestinians.

The naming of the groups presented them as being a long way apart. There were indigenous Australians and non-indigenous Australians. This is an amazing formulation; 98% of the population is defined by what it is not. The use of the term indigenous for Aborigines had innocent enough origins. The Torres Strait Islanders do not want to be mistaken for Aborigines, though they want to share their status. Hence the mouthful term ‘Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders’ had to be used. Indigenous was a simpler portmanteau term and simultaneously it was coming into use at the United Nations which also needed a generic term. But only in Australia was the settler population then defined as non-indigenous – there are not non-indigenous Americans or non-indigenous New Zealanders. ‘Non-indigenous’ implies a people without roots in this place; it elides the fact that settlers have been here for eight generations, that they have formed a distinctive polity and are not indigenous to anywhere else; they regard Australia as their home. On the other side it elides the fact that most Aborigines are descendants of settlers and the original indigenous population. The formulation in fact casts modern Australia as if it were 1788: one group has just stepped off the boat and confronts the traditional owners of the country. That’s where the liberal imagination is fixated.

The process of Reconciliation enjoyed bipartisan support in the federal parliament. The Liberal and National parties had opposed Labor’s dalliance with land rights and a treaty; it supported Reconciliation with the proviso that the Reconciliation Council was to consult widely before it committed itself to any document of reconciliation. The Council did produce a Declaration of Reconciliation, elegantly drafted by David Malouf and Jackie Huggins, which acknowledged Aborigines as original owners and custodians and that the land was colonised without



their consent. It also offered an apology in these terms: 'as one part of the nation expresses its sorrow and profoundly regrets the injustices of the past, so the other part accepts the apology and forgives.'

To discover what the Australian people thought of the Declaration, the Council commissioned a poll and organised focus groups. On the issue of an apology, people were asked to agree or disagree with the proposition that 'On behalf of the community, governments should apologise to Aboriginal people for what's happened in the past.' This was a more comprehensive apology than envisaged by the draft where the apology was for 'injustices'. Fifty-seven per cent of people disagreed with the proposition; 40 per cent agreed. This was the strongest dissent that the pollsters encountered. The advantage of defining closely what should be apologised for was obviously not recognised. 'What's happened in the past' includes the European settlement of the country. Only hypocrites can apologise for that.

The apology survived in the final document, which was presented to Australian leaders at the Sydney Opera House in May 2000. Prime Minister John Howard produced a revised version of the document without an apology. He had always made clear his opposition to an apology of any sort. The government was prepared to express 'profound regrets' that past injustices had occurred but not to apologise for them. The government very firmly rejected the Reconciliation Council's plan to continue working on a treaty after 2001, which had passed without the spectacular results hoped for it.

The acute social problem that Australia faces is not the division between Aborigines and settler Australians. It is that many Aborigines in remote Australia live in communities which have appalling records on health, housing, employment and rates of imprisonment. These are Aboriginal communities; the few settler Australians who live there provide services to them. Decent liberal-minded people worry enormously about this social malaise, but they keep mistaking its cure; they think that the moment of reconciliation which they desperately seek is necessary to fix this problem. In fact their attitudes have been making it worse.

The Reconciliation Council which was formed to heal a social divide had added to its brief the addressing of what was called Aboriginal

disadvantage. The Liberal and National parties supported Reconciliation on the basis that practical measures would be taken to improve Aboriginal communities, which they saw as more pressing than symbolic acts, still less a treaty. This is the approach that Prime Minister Howard later termed 'practical reconciliation'. Those who believed in the symbolism of a declaration of reconciliation or a treaty then argued in response that Aborigines cannot be whole people until past hurts are acknowledged. The difficulty with this argument is that among the most troubled communities are those that exist on their own land and, comparatively, have experienced little disturbance from settlers. Their health and life expectancy are appalling but they may still be initiating their young men.

The social situation in these communities has got worse over the past thirty years not better. Welfare without the usual work tests replaced employment at low wages; schools were built without ensuring that students attended them; health declined because of alcohol and drug abuse. Huge sums were spent on buildings and equipment that were trashed or never used. The situation was allowed to continue because of the commitment to supporting traditional life on Aboriginal lands, though there were few worthwhile jobs there. Generosity and respect in this generation have done more damage to Aboriginal communities than the indifference and neglect of the past.

Now in Cape York the erstwhile radical leader Noel Pearson is steering a new course. He has attacked welfare dependency; he wants to create real jobs for his people; and he plans to send the young away to get a decent education. He has identified as part of the problem the progressively-minded people in Sydney and Melbourne who walked across bridges as one of the symbolic acts sponsored by the Reconciliation Council. He complains that their soft-headness about social problems has been too influential on policy: the treatment of welfare as a right; of alcohol abuse as a symptom of malaise rather than something to be attacked in itself; and the willingness to excuse anti-social behaviour as the result of poor treatment in the past. Perhaps soon the progressively-minded people will be asked to apologise.

What does Australian history look like if we assume a close interaction between settler Australians and Aborigines and not distance? Here are some Notes Towards the Definition of an Integrated Australia.

The explorer Matthew Flinders, knowing the Aboriginal love of ceremony, put on a special display when he left King George's Sound after spending a month there in 1801. He ordered his marines ashore and put them through their drill. The Aborigines were delighted with the men in their red coats and white crossed belts; these 'red-and-white men', said Flinders, had 'some resemblance to their own manner of ornamenting themselves'. They followed their drill closely and one old man put himself at the end of the rank and using a stick imitated the soldiers' movements as they shouldered and grounded their weapons. When the anthropologist Daisy Bates visited King George's Sound over a hundred years later she found an old man who could still do the drill. He covered his torso in red and put white pipe-clay across the red and performed the movements as his father and grandfathers had taught him. The Aborigines had made of the drill a sacred ceremony with Flinders and his men being spirits returning from the dead. John Mulvaney in *Encounters in Place* writes, 'This Aboriginal application of ritual exchange, of formal ceremonial involving hierarchy, persons with special functions, particular dress, and display of regalia, has application to later developments' – like the enlistment of Aborigines into the Native Police and their enthusiasm for organised sport, especially cricket.

Aborigines were attracted to European food and tobacco – and this before their own society had broken down. Stanner witnessed this process in the Northern Territory in the 1930s. He reports in 'Continuity and Change' how one group of Aborigines tried to get tobacco and tea through another which had a supply because they had settled with Europeans: 'The encroachers used every claim of right they had – kinship, affinity, friendship, name-sake relationship, trade partnership – to get and keep a toehold.' This movement towards settler society was not intended as a break with their own, though that could be the consequence. Aborigines saw immediately the superiority of iron axes to their own stone ones. In a famous 1952 article, 'Steel axes for Stone-Age Australians', Lauriston Sharp argued that the new axes threatened the

stability of Aboriginal society since the making and distribution of stone axes was intimately linked to the maintenance of kin relationships and no explanation of the new axes was provided in the Aboriginal cosmology. This view of Aboriginal society as a fragile structure is now discredited. The axes were not so disturbing – axes occur because of white man's Dreaming.

However, Aboriginal society had its points of tension. Older men took the young women as wives and the young men were left with none or with the older women. Young men and women wanting to escape this regime were attracted to settler society, which could not always protect them from the retribution of the old men. On Bathurst Island the Catholic missionary Bishop smoothed matters over by buying the young girls from the older men and then marrying them to young men. He became known, as his book telling of his exploits has it, as *The Bishop with 150 Wives*.

Henry Reynolds in *With the White People* tells of how much Aborigines contributed to the European exploration and development of the country. The explorers were not 'discovering'; they were following their Aboriginal guides. Bushman learnt their bushcraft from the Aborigines. Much of the work in the outback was done by Aborigines. Today, choose at random six white Australians and six Aborigines and examine their family history. Of the whites, two would be postwar migrants or their children, two could trace descent from late nineteenth-century colonists mostly in the cities, perhaps two would have ancestors who had done pioneering work on the land. But of the Aborigines all six would have ancestors who were stock-workers, shepherds, trackers, troopers, pearl-divers. Much of this was forced or semi-forced labour. However the priority for Aborigines was not good working conditions but a proper relation with the boss. Reynolds writes,

Aborigines worked out of a sense of obligation – as a favour to particular individuals, not because they felt they should be 'industrious'. Work was not a matter of an unequal exchange between master and servant but merely one aspect of a reciprocal relationship. Long-term bosses were not seen as masters so much as *de facto* kin – as classificatory uncles or brothers.

Most modern Aborigines have Aborigines and settler Australians as their ancestors. The sexual congress between Aborigines and settlers ranged from rape to settled unions, though seldom to marriage. The attractiveness of Aboriginal women to European men, both the lure of 'black velvet', and the stigma of acknowledging it, are the themes of Xavier Herbert's novel of the Northern Territory, *Capricornia* (1938). It honours the lack of hypocrisy of Tim O'Cannon, a railway ganger who lived openly with an Aboriginal wife and acknowledged his children. There is a similar character in *Coonardoo* (1929), Katherine Susannah Prichard's novel set in the north of Western Australia. Sam Geary has several wives and many children and cites the patriarchs of the Old Testament in support of his behaviour. Hugh Watt, his neighbour and the central character in the book, despises Geary and will not give himself to the Aboriginal girl Coonardoo whom he loves. She waits patiently, puzzled, wanting to give herself to him. Hugh's refusal leads to their mutual ruin and that of his station. The novel caused a scandal when it was published for allowing that a decent man could love an Aboriginal woman; it is still in print carrying the message that 'You had to keep in the life flow of the country – its land and its original people – to survive.'

The pioneer anthropologists Spencer and Gillen, who studied the Arunta in Central Australia, coined the term Dreamtime. It was not a translation of an Arunta word; it combined two words that seemed to have a similar root: the word for what is eternal and the word for dreaming. Hence Dreamtime. Stanner took out 'time' altogether, for this cosmology is every-when. Hence The Dreaming. Some traditional Aborigines did not recognise it as appropriate for themselves, but it has become now the term used by modern Aborigines to discuss Aboriginal culture. It has also been used by settler Australians for their own world, as in John Carroll's *The Western Dreaming*.

T. G. H. Strehlow published his *Songs of Central Australia* in 1971. Barry Hill in his *Broken Song* defines its status and its double origin:

Strehlow designed his book to sing and elucidate the soul of the first inhabitants and it does so with the lyricism of the *Song of Songs* and the gravity of the *Torah*. There have been other renderings of

Aboriginal poetry, and they have been splendid reminders of the depth of the culture that has pulsed here so long, but no other book has been as embracing as Strehlow's, or more honorifically committed to placing the 'first songs' of the 'first people' in the context of world poetry. In *Songs*, Aboriginal life breathes in the company of Greek and Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Hebraic utterance.

In the 1930s Margaret Preston studied Aboriginal design closely and urged that it be the basis of a truly Australian art. She was in touch with the Jindyworobak movement, which wanted to use Aboriginal words and concepts to make a truly Australian literature. These were both awkward appropriations. In the renaissance of Australian art in the 1940s and 1950s Drysdale, Nolan, Boyd and others regularly treated Aboriginal subjects. Geoffrey Dutton in *White on Black* reports that this unparalleled preoccupation went 'beyond national problems to the roots of human existence on earth, and what humans have left on earth'. In the 1970s when Geoffrey Bardon at Papunya gave the Aboriginal elders canvas, boards and paints, the wondrous designs and patterns that had previously been rendered in sand and on flesh could hang on gallery walls here and overseas.

Aborigines today are more devoted to Christianity than settler Australians. Christianity gave new meaning and purpose to part-Aborigines and was frequently the basis of community morale. When traditional Aborigines embrace Christianity, its key figures and episodes take on strange forms within The Dreaming. Tony Swain in *Aboriginal Australians and Christian Missions* found that the Warlpiri at Yeundumu thought that Adam, Moses and Jesus all lived on the one day, a likely outcome when a faith that is historically based enters a cosmology without time. But Christians too need timelessness for some purposes and Swain suggests that The Dreaming is a good rendering of Augustine's understanding that 'eternity is the "now" of God.'

Aboriginal protest is not located outside settler society. To speak their grievance Aborigines have to use the language of their conquerors and manipulate their concepts and values. They have always received help in this from settler Australians.

The Gurindji at Wave Hill struck for equal wages in 1966, a cause

that Australians could understand and which was advanced by the presence at Wave Hill of Frank Hardy, the communist, who knew something about how to run a strike. I had always believed, on the basis of Hardy's own account in *Unlucky Australians*, that it was the Aborigines who gradually revealed to him that they were more concerned with pushing their rights to the land. But as Bain Attwood shows in *Rights for Aborigines*, land rights had long been the policy of the Communist Party. So this crucial new turn in Aboriginal protest cannot be set down solely as an Aboriginal initiative.

Tim Flannery in *The Future Eaters* argues that Aborigines and European settlers both mistook the land they came to. Both discovered that it was not as abundant as it appeared and had to make fundamental adjustments to their way of life. He considers the European adjustment has only just begun. I think the contrariness of the country – the droughts and flooding rains – was recognised by settler Australians sooner than Flannery allows. I remember my father saying when some disaster struck, 'We should give the country back to the blacks,' a sentiment which I know did not arise from a recognition of Aboriginal land rights. I could find no other reference to this saying and thought, as was possible, that my father had coined it. Then in Richard Broome's *Aboriginal Victorians* I found this Aboriginal song of the Depression years:

White boy he now pays all taxes  
Keeps Jacky Jacky in clothes and food  
He don't care what becomes of the country  
White boy's tucker him pretty good

*Chorus*

Clicketa Boobilah wildy maah  
Billying etcha gingerry wah

Now the country's short of money  
Jacky sits and laughs all day  
White boy wants to give it back to Jacky  
No fear, Jacky won't have it that way

Germaine Greer in *Whitefella Jump Up* and Inga Clendinnen in *Dancing with Strangers* have claimed that there is a similarity in Aboriginal and settler Australian humour. Perhaps this is so. How could it be so? Has it something to do with this bugger of a country?

When David Malouf was working on the Declaration for Reconciliation, he was for the most part improving on the standard talk about Aborigines and settler Australians. He had one novel idea that quickly disappeared because his clients could not understand it. His draft began with 'The people of Australia, of many origins, recognising the gift of one another's presence ...' That's not being sorry or forgiving at all.

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