

John Hirst, Sense and Nonsense
in Australian History (Melbourne:
Black Inc. Agenda, 2009): 80-103

How Sorry Can We Be?

In 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.

*