

Sixteen

Native Born

Nations are built with pens and brushes not just hammers and nails. They exhibit their character in what they say about themselves as much as what is said about them.

But when Port Phillip gained its independence from New South Wales and became Victoria an independent colony spirit rose in the hearts of the native born and they prided themselves on being the sporting champions of the world: nowhere could you find a man of such strength and endurance, nowhere could you find men and women of such liberty.

The achievements of the people are truly phenomenal. The energy, the labour, the inventiveness is miraculous. The will to build, clear and plough, to sow and shear, chop and burn was of heroic proportions. All but a few dozen of the giant trees in the precipitous Otway ranges of Victoria were chopped down, sawn and shipped between 1870 and the early 1930s. The magnitude of the enterprise is almost impossible to comprehend. The stories of individual squatters who tore the giant stumps out of the ground and then ploughed and sowed these steep lands makes your teeth ache with the effort, unimaginable to anyone who has not worked in the bush with five kilos of clay clinging to their boots and ten of forest rain dragging down their clothes.

Some stood and watched as fire or flood eliminated all they had built. The bleakness in their hearts must have gnawed at their bones, but most of them split more logs, ploughed more acres, sowed more seed, milked more cows; their stoic labour perhaps never surpassed on the planet.

And yet these tireless and valiant men were the same involved in the massacres and poisonings, and if not directly involved, benefited from the 'liberated' lands that fell to them as a result; and when their ploughs turned up the smashed skulls of children they would quietly drop them into a hollow stump or ghoulishly polish them and set them in a satin-lined trove as a keepsake of conquest. I have seen such glory boxes. If there were some who railed against this barbarity, this wholesale murder, the theft of these lands, then apart from Dawson and a couple of others, the remembrances of their humanity must be very hard to obtain.

In the early, more brazen days, skulls were nailed to the doors of huts as a warning, or sat on fence posts to scare the living daylight out of all relations who might pass that way.

But soon the time of amnesia arrived and those things were forgotten as if they'd never happened, only to be spoken of with people whose opinion you could trust entirely. Despite all that has happened since those times that early amnesia has left a void in the national soul. There are still people with the satin lined glory boxes, the black velvet bags full of children's finger bones and more ostentatiously the greenstone axe of 'the last tribesman of this area', safe to speak of him now that he has gone and cannot lay claim to his land. Not that a claim would do him any good now that federal parliament insists that a man can only make a claim if he is living on his land, speaking his language and practising his culture: as if Captain Cook never arrived. This is a law which the courts are happy to uphold, the judges pursing their lips in refined contemplation of the inadequacy of the claim, sanctified by their meticulous application of justice. Swept away by the tide of history they say. Hard but fair. Very *fair*.

Convenient amnesia became self-delusion so that in 1998 R J McCormick could write in his history of the western plains, *Ready for the Plough*, 'A few Aborigines were already settled in the area.'¹ He writes this in his only lines about the history before white invasion as if the Wathaurong had stolen a march on the squatters by a few days. How could you believe this in 1998 unless your educational and political systems were wholly inefficient or corrupted by a deliberate fraud?

The vast majority of historical references are like this, either never mentioning Aboriginal occupation or, like McCormick, dismissing them in an inaccurate paragraph. It continues today even from the most earnest and benign sources.

I was shown a draft of the history of Apollo Bay and objected in the strongest terms to the brief and inaccurate paragraph on the Gadubanoot. I even submitted a short but accurate alternative. The offer was rejected.

In 2004 I read a manuscript produced by a local Reconciliation committee which used the word natives when referring to the Kulin people. Almost any school text you like to pick up will parrot the 'fact' that Aboriginal people arrived as 'migrants just like us' across the Asian land bridges. This neat little combination of words seems to wash Lady Macbeth's hands of all guilt. Very tidy, all parcelled up: ah good, we've solved *that* problem, *they* have no more right to the land than us.

This theory of migration seeks to ignore all the conflicting archaeological evidence which suggests that Aboriginal people were already here before the last period when the land bridges were negotiable by small watercraft. Some scientists refused to believe that smoking caused lung cancer and today some don't believe that carbon emissions are harming the world atmosphere or that Aborigines were here earlier than 40,000 years ago. There are gaps in the evidence, although they are quickly being closed, but in a text for *students* it's crucial to allude to the probability. Education is meant to feed the enquiring mind, to provide sufficient information for considered opinions to develop; not to perpetuate a lazy *truth* lifted from an impoverished analysis manipulated to clear up the Aboriginal problem quickly and neatly so that the writer can get on with the really interesting stuff of the Rum Rebellion. Even Manning Clark could hardly wait to get beyond the obligatory paragraphs preceding 1788.

Proponents of the view that Indigenous occupation of Australia began at least 60,000 years ago, and maybe as early as 120,000, are treated by conservative politicians and historians as if they argued against the Iraq war or that greenhouse gasses are produced by industrialisation. Antiquity of human occupation of Australia should not

be repressed just because it necessitates a review of world history; quite the opposite.

It is a debate a mature intellectual community must undertake. What better place to start than *Nature Australia*, Spring 2000, where Jim Allen reviews the modern archaeological dating systems. 'Having modern humans in Australia before 45,000 years ago requires significant adjustments to world pre-history'.² Allen gives reasons why some old dates for Australian occupation need to be scrutinised by the latest science but insists that it is the silliest notion on earth to pretend that Aborigines couldn't have lived here earlier than 40,000 years ago simply because European history finds it difficult to contemplate.

The recent discovery of million-year-old 'hobbit' skeletons on Flores should cause us to query accepted theories of global settlement, and there is no reason why we shouldn't ask if these people were embarked on a migration north rather than south. The theory of Aboriginal arrival in Australia via the south-east Asian land bridge seems under siege from scientific discoveries of the last decade.

Dr Tim Senden found the 380-million-year-old fossil of *Gogonaspis* in north-western Australia in 2005 and believes this shows that creatures might have first moved from sea to land in Australia.³ The skeleton of this creature shows incredible similarities to the articulation of the human skeleton. We have to wonder where humans first walked, not that it's particularly crucial if it happened in Africa or Australia, but surely it obliges us to pay more credence to the possibility that Aboriginal insistence 'that we have always been here' might just be correct.

While at university I often asked why so few studied Australian history, why it was never studied at all at most universities, and was told it was too boring, that the parliamentary period was too short to have allowed a Guy Fawkes rebellion or the murder of a few queens. Australian history is boring only because 200 years is studied and not the full 60,000. Of course it's difficult to study the history of a culture without written language but it hasn't stopped the world producing a million historical texts on the Aztecs and Incas.

They are hot topics for television but the age of these civilisations varies from 2000 to 7000 years. Where is the energy to study civilisations of 60,000 to 120,000 years? The common link between the civilisations seductive to the western imagination is their fascination with gold, silver, jewels and slavery, that is, civilisations having most in common with the western and eastern empires of today. The engineering feats are called wonders of the world, the accumulation of gold and gemstones into ownership of the few is admired, slavery and oppression considered the natural ancillary of progress. Civilisations where the emphasis is on equality of opportunity and equal access to food do not concentrate the riches into tombs and palaces for the wealthy and so, in archaeological terms, leave almost no trace; tourists will never gawk at their statuary and gilt cupolas, will never wonder about a race where all were fed, all were involved in the celebration of the culture and enjoying their lives in equal measure.

To claim that the smelting of gold is an indication of technological genius is nonsense. Gold has almost no technological use. Aboriginal Australians knew the metal but had almost no use for such a soft substance. Other cultures, however, have used it as an economic indicator: those who have gold and those who don't. Possession of gold is an element of class differentiation. The civilisations which possessed gold often took it from earlier owners and those aggressions represent the accepted story of human destiny.

There's no need to soft focus the noble savage but a desperate imperative to understand the philosophy of a civilisation that eschewed gold, slavery, obscene wealth and territorial war. This is not a warm and cuddly notion, it is not even an argument for or against capitalism or communism, but a search for understanding of a crucial development in the civilisation of the human race. Space travel and golden cupolas may, conversely, prove to be the expressions of a civilisation which eliminates itself by over-consumption. There's no need for all Australians to eat bush tucker and practise Indigenous ceremony, but a mature reflection of how a society divides resources and limits population growth seems to be warranted.

While archaeology is a branch of engineering departments attitudes will never change; while politics faculties are besotted with the rule of kings and calumnies within castle walls, the roots of democracy will never be explored and the future development of civilisation will be crippled by our obsession with adversarial systems of politics and law, and their worship of contest and conquest.

In all the learned debates about clashes between white and black everyone is limited to the review of written information but there are unmined sources still to be examined. People at Framlingham still speak of an occasion when a whole clan was driven off the headland and into the sea at Massacre Bay near Peterborough. Surfers still report human bones on the beach to bored authorities and yet if it was the foot of a Sydney to Hobart sailor the army and police would search the area for three months.

The details of the Peterborough incident are still quite clear and consistent in Indigenous memory and yet there is no official record of the event. There are still documents to be exhumed and within them a keen student may find evidence to reveal such hidden crimes. An elder of the Yorta Yorta people told me of a 'massacre' that happened on the Murray River where 'hundreds, thousands' of Aborigines were killed and he claimed the field of bones discovered, when Lake Victoria emptied in the recent drought was from that incident. I have heard similar stories repeated in consistent detail and yet the available records are silent. Correspondents could be mistaken or their reports exaggerated or they might be right, but we'll never know unless their claims are examined.

Research of Australian history is treated with disdain by our universities and institutions. Of course there are some notable exceptions, but in general the study of our country's past is considered low rent. In 2001 I began searching for a lost manuscript. Academics had been aware for decades that Assistant Aboriginal Protector William Thomas' language lists were incomplete but no-one knew where the second half had got to. The La Trobe library was astounded when I found it in a file under the name of one of Thomas' contemporaries. The story of how and why half of Thomas' manuscript had been usurped by a bloke called Crouch is worth a book of its own but why was it left to a mug researcher with no training to bring the two halves together?

I had three long and detailed conversations with library staff and I begged them to correct the cataloguing error for the sake of future research. The new half of the manuscript added over a hundred new words to three supposedly lost languages, a very important document by any standards but still the library has not replied. If it was Bradman's serviette or Dame Nellie's bus ticket it would have been front page news on every Packer and Murdoch tabloid.

I've been given a letter by one Western District family which records a massacre of Gadubanoot people in the Otway region but I can't match the date or details with any documented event. A boy survived this massacre by hanging onto the stirrups of a police horse. He was captured and taken to the police barracks, but I can find no record of what happened to him next.

In trying to examine the location where another local legend talks of piles of human bones I have been prevented from investigation by nervous landowners panicked by the government's warning about whites losing their back yards to land claims. Howard deliberately generated this panic to pave the way for his demolition of the High Court's judgment that the Wik people owned their land. But time may allow that search, as fear cannot be maintained after the death of farmers or the malicious ignorance of politicians. The field of research of these and other events is open to any who care to spend their time and intellect in the pursuit. Many leads will prove false, but others will tell us more about the Silent War, about who we are.

Australian history isn't boring, it's just too hot to handle; it calls into question everything that Australians believe about themselves. Better to ignore it all together, pretend it didn't happen, lest it destroy the idealised stories of 'explorers and pioneers.' It's natural to want to believe that we are a strong, industrious and generous people. The desire to want to be known as a good people is an important and positive characteristic, but the path to those credentials is more difficult. We are strong, we are industrious, we are generous but we are also very selective in the application of our finest qualities. We give with incredible generosity when a Tsunami hits our holiday coasts in Indonesia and Thailand but fall silent whenever earthquakes devastate Pakistan or former AFL

footballer Michael Long, pleads for his country and countrymen and women.

Instead of pretending that antipathy to Aboriginal Australians doesn't exist, we should strive to explain the impulse, and understanding it is half way to repairing it. Luther Standing Bear of the American Lakota had pondered the invaders' earnest antipathy and concluded:

The white man does not understand the Indian for the reason that he does not understand America. He is too removed from its formative processes. The roots of the tree of his life have not grasped the rock and soil. The white man is still troubled with primitive fears; he still has in his consciousness the perils of this frontier continent, some of its fastnesses not yet having yielded to his questing footsteps and inquiring eyes...And he still hates the man who questioned his path across the continent.⁴

It's interesting to look at Indigenous commentary because too often Indigenous intellectuals are considered either holy mystics or disreputable fools. Luther Standing Bear is never considered a genuine world figure because his name seems quaint when compared to Winston Churchill, Benjamin Franklin and Sigmund Freud. The weight of his words alone is not sufficient for him to have been taken seriously as a commentator on the American psyche. The same fate has befallen Pat Dodson, Gary Foley, Lowitja O'Donohue and Jack Davis despite their unique insights into what makes Australia tick. We ignore such people at our peril.

The avoidance of the truth still haunts; it can't go away until the nation braces itself, clears its throat and says, 'yes, this is what happened, this is our history', this is how four generations of our family have prospered on this wheat farm, estuary fishery, orchard, oyster farm, timber industry, mining claim or whatever created their wealth.

Avoidance didn't finish with La Trobe, didn't even start with him, in fact under his relatively enlightened administration may even have been restrained; not prevented, but slowed down, and if death by a thousand cuts is preferred to outright murder then La Trobe's influence probably transformed the single murderous blow into a series of more subtle, but equally deadly, excisions.

The surgery of La Trobe remains effective because of the nation's self-administered anaesthesia. In *A Coastal Diary* John Landy remarks that the Gadubanoot 'died out so quickly' that we know little about them.⁵ Landy was Governor of Victoria, a champion Olympic gold medallist, the man who stopped mid-race in the Olympics to help a fallen athlete to his feet. *A Coastal Diary* is a superb book, every Australian should read it, and yet this man of such incredible talents and sensitivity believes that the Aborigines died out. It is shocking to realise how this impoverished history has pervaded even the most sensitive Australian minds.

French and German tourists have approached me, Australian history book in hand, and asked me, 'Do you believe this, this *died out, disappeared* nonsense?' Perfect strangers to the country know enough about world history to bring clear-eyed scepticism to such statements and yet our finest minds are blinded by the poisonous mists of their education, the myths spooned into the mouths of all Australian students. If John Landy believes the Aborigines died out, the task ahead of the nation's education system is truly awful.

These myths were established by men with no more refined motive than greed. The lies were a screen for the blatant violation of their country's law. Anyone who did that today might spend five years in a jail without charges being laid. Such is the power and momentum of self interest, and the admiration with which most men view greed, that our national story reads like a nursery rhyme for spoilt children.

The urgent needs of the native sons and their access to the land's riches allowed the colony to flourish and its culture to become gross with the callow arrogance of youth.

The great deeds of land clearance, 'exploration', the construction of cities progressing at miraculous pace, meant there was no time or inclination to reflect on the war or the law. The writers and painters whom you might have expected to ponder the source of all these riches, instead were swept along by the riotous energy of the native-born currency lads, painting portraits of the newly rich and their horses, dashing off rhyming stanzas to celebrate those horses and their fearless Australian-born riders. Too busy with the brighter more optimistic palette to see black. Too embedded with the invader to see through their own eyes.

Artists' impressions of Aboriginal life, when they appeared, were of two types: lampoon sketches for the popular press or romanticised paintings of idyllic savages suitable for the tastes of London.

Literature was even worse. Henry Lawson was born on the Grenfell goldfields in 1867 and was one of those characters in whom, Manning Clark liked to say, the gales of life blew intemperately.

Lawson was born in a poor man's tent and later, when under his mother's influence, he began to write of the Australian bush and its characters, cleaving to the larrikin spirit, the republican, the battler.

The man who Clark believed became 'the conscience of a nation,' published his first poem in the *Bulletin* in 1887, *A Song of the Republic*.

Sons of the South, awake! arise!
 sons of the south, and do.
 Banish from under your bonny skies
 Those old-world errors and wrongs and lies
 Making a hell in Paradise
 That belongs to your sons and you.⁶

Boldly patriotic and fitting the colony's republican feelings, but there was better to come. 'Arvie Aspinall's Alarm Clock' and 'His Father's Mate' are classics of the age but it is 'Faces in the Street' where Lawson's empathy with the downtrodden is most obvious:

They lie the men who tell us in a loud decisive tone
 That want is here a stranger, and that misery's unknown,
 For where the nearest suburb and the city proper meet
 My window sill is level with the faces in the street —
 Drifting past, drifting past,
 To the beat of weary feet —
 While I sorrow for those owners of those faces in the street...
 The human river dwindles when 'tis past the hour of eight,
 Its waves go flowing faster in the fear of being late,
 But slowly drag the moments, whilst beneath the dirt and heat,
 The city grinds the owners of the faces in the street —
 Grinding body, grinding soul

Yielding scarce enough to eat —
 Oh, I sorrow for the owners of the faces in the street.

One of the world's most plangent socialist anthems and, true to Lawson's generous heart, a plea for the emancipation of the oppressed, and yet in the pages of his work there is something missing.

'Faces in the Street' was written in the late 1880s and the war was well and truly over. It's true there were still occasional massacres in the more remote parts, but in general terms the frontier was transforming into towns and streets, a new urbanity was arriving; but from that crude eruption of civility the Aboriginal Australians were banned. Even as early as 1842 Aborigines were forbidden the town's streets after dusk.

Lawson, the great heart and conscience of Australia, would have seen these fringe dwellers. He saw the Chinese mullock fossickers and his depictions of them are generally sympathetic if a little condescending, but where are the Aborigines?

You will search and search through the powerful body of his work and find almost no reference to them, but wait, there is one, and here it is in perhaps the most famous Australian story of all, 'The Drover's Wife'.

The poor woman alone in her house but for her young family and her dog, staying awake all night because there's a snake under the house, the great terror of the bush, every Australian's worst nightmare. The night is dark and she is almost out of candles and with little wood to keep the fire alight she creeps out to the woodheap:

She seizes a stick, pulls it out, and — crash! the whole pile collapses.

Yesterday she bargained with a stray blackfellow to bring her some wood, and while he was at work she went in search of a missing cow. She was absent an hour or so, and the native black made good use of his time. On her return she was so astonished to see a good heap of wood by the chimney, that she gave him an extra fig of tobacco, and praised him for not being lazy. He thanked her and left with head erect and chest well out. He was

the last of his tribe and a King, but he built that wood-heap hollow.

So, the *extra* fig of tobacco is what, *extra* to the one or two she promised, the bargain she drove so hard, a whole heap of wood for some shreds of the coarsest tobacco?

A fig of tobacco is about the size of a knob of goat shit, tastes about the same and costs not much more.

Who, in 1887, was going to stack a mountain of wood for a couple of knobs of goat shit?

And what's the drama? A snake. Australia's great paranoia with its wildlife. Many more Australians are killed by European bees and universal lightning than by sharks, snakes, redbacks, funnel-webs, stingrays and in fact any of our fauna. Our hatred of snakes, sharks and spiders is part of our inability to cope with the continent.

Lawson empathised with the drover's wife but not the real owner of the land. Did his heart quiver at all when he wrote 'the last of his tribe'? Geoffrey Blainey's didn't. Blainey has spent most of his career trying to explain the Australian character and the defining moments of its development. He is one of Australia's foremost thinkers and has studied Aboriginal history far more completely than most, but from a point of view of finding the reason why Europeans had to defeat them. The desire to prove the preconceived caused Blainey to play down the contribution of Aboriginal people to the nation's development as well as the nature of the conflict they endured. Similarly he dismisses the Chinese as a troublesome force in our history. Blainey has been an outspoken critic of Asian immigration and his opinion affects his literary appreciation as well as his interpretation of what Australians are like or what he thinks they should be like.

In an article in *Overland* in 2004 Chek Ling, an Australian resident for over 42 years, reviews Blainey's attitudes to Lawson's work and its treatment of Chinese. He argues that Blainey enjoyed 'the waning of Henry Lawson's star over the past forty years,' but has more in common with the author than he realises. Lawson 'suffers from the present vogue for political correctness because he was sometimes hostile to the collective presence of the Chinese in Australia.'⁷

'My guess,' Chek Ling continues, is that Lawson's loss of popularity has more to do with our concern these days to be identified with the 'winners.' Lawson was a Loser. His life was punctuated by spells of drunkenness, prison...and the mental hospital. I just cannot imagine that readers attracted to Lawson would be put off because of his poems about the Chinese which were few and far between. Lawson was more a chronicler of the times than an opportunist Chinese-basher to advance his own standing. He was no populist Pauline Hanson or John Howard. Nor did he need to be.⁸

Chek Ling thinks Blainey's position on Lawson says more about Blainey's own objection to the Chinese presence in Australia and quotes the professor's 1982 ABC television history, produced a couple of years before he launched headlong into his attack on Asian immigration. 'In the gold era (1850s), Australians experienced what is now called a multicultural society. Their experience convinced them that such a society didn't work; and at the time clearly it didn't work.'⁹

In that era unionists sang anti-Chinese songs and the press and authorities mounted a demonisation of the 'Chinese Devils.' White women's virtue could never be guaranteed in their presence because of the obsequious guise of the sly Chinese.

The same process of denigration and fear was applied to the Indigenous population. Lawson virtually ignored them but, as Chek Ling says, ignoring the presence of another race was not the most virulent form of racism being practised at the time. It is mild compared to murder and provocatively designed legislation and impromptu interpretations designed to inflict maximum damage on the 'heathens'.

But artists are supposed to see the world more clearly, more tolerantly than the normal man in the street. Where is God when his children use the word heathen so inexactly? Where are our artists when crimes of morality are committed and remain unreported?

The artistic and political arms of infant white Australian culture are eerily similar and quite frightening when you see those crude original sentiments echoed 200 years later.

Political correctness can be ugly in its extreme form. I have heard some enthusiasts greet the first Aboriginal people they've ever

met with open arms and a gushing ‘Oh, you are such beautiful, wise people. I’ve been so looking forward to meeting you.’ Sometimes the targets didn’t speak English but if they did they were off their tucker for a week.

Conflating idiotic sentimentality with considered arguments about the value of Aboriginal heritage has been Howard’s cynical triumph, but the fact that some prattle sentimental muck doesn’t absolve Australia from the task of contemplating its history in a more considered fashion. Intelligent debate might cause oxygen deprivation for ideologues of either persuasion, but might also allow mature ideas to breathe. The frontier was a place confused by the grandeur of liberal theology coming out of London and the chaos of malice, greed and opportunistic racism at the coal face. The present is afflicted by all those things but with the added retardation of apathy and profound ignorance.

La Trobe was at the coal face and often in the dark. His imperial flaw: the arrogant assumption of British superiority and righteousness, the right to dispossess people and a belief that it was God’s will that an Englishman should do it. The destruction of a non-material culture was considered an act of no consequence.

The flaw which caused the blindness in La Trobe, that one aching wound in one of such great abilities, has remained in the country and resurfaces in the genes of Lawson, the country’s greatest writer. A heart of such great compassion, but a head of such blindness that it cannot see black; so unnerved by the colour that, like many Australians, he supported the Boers in their right to massacre Africans. Lawson’s blindness was common but much more virulent in many others. JF Archibald, the editor of the *Bulletin*, Lawson’s great patron and a key figure in the development of Australian arts and ideas, was fervent in his racism, his bold republicanism ridiculing the British but viciously deriding the Indigenous.

In 1908 his magazine’s banner standard proclaimed ‘Australia for the White Man’ and the cartoons depicting Aboriginal people are gross.

Racism, ignorance and prejudice flourish in the fertile soul of Australia’s search for independent identity. Gallipoli is yet to come, but rather than the Australian character trembling in anticipation

of creation, for the molten metal to spill into the heroic mould, that metal has already cooled as a rod in Henry Lawson's soul, cooled so quickly that he can write 'the last of his tribe', 'stray blackfellow' and never wonder at the chain of events which brought that circumstance about.

It is 1887 but the Australian character is already cool slag in the die, well and truly cast.

We'll wait a long time for Judith Wright; we'll wait even longer for Kevin Gilbert, Richard Frankland and Alexis Wright, and in the meantime there'll be many Mary and Elizabeth Duracks, Xavier Herberts and Marlo Morgans.

Xavier Herbert. You can't knock the great friend of the Aborigines. Well, go back and read *Poor Fellow My Country* again. Sure, there are a lot of blackfellas in the novel, sure there's a lot of sympathy, but who's the hero of the novel? The great white hunter himself, Xavier Herbert, without whose help no blackfella would be capable of doing anything. Australians have read so many of these novels and histories with cataracts over their eyes, and that white veil obscures all but the faintest outline of reality.

Eve Langley is considered by many to have written one of the most original Australian novels. *The Pea Pickers*, when considered in the literary climate of the era, is vibrant with its evocation of Australian mateship and the bush and heretical in its challenge of conventional sex roles. A radical and influential book in the history of Australian literature but like Lawson, Langley can't see the colour black. Her novel is set in the market gardens of East Gippsland and celebrates the Australian worker not in soft focus Empire glory but as it was, full of Italians, Germans and battling Australians. Dramatically different from how the *Bulletin* saw the iconic worker of the wide brown land.

In any literature such a shift in consciousness would be significant but Langley's portrayal of the Australian character has another element of significance to our culture; she is colour blind. The pea, bean, maize, grape and fruit harvesters of that era were predominantly black. The Aboriginal history of southern Australia from Federation to the introduction of mechanical harvesters is set against the itinerant life of the crop picker. Today, talk among

members of Aboriginal communities never proceeds far without mention of peas and beans, grapes and maize and the districts of Bruthen, Bairnsdale, Bega and Mildura.

Despite this fact of history Langley's novel is graced by one Aboriginal person who arrives and leaves the stage in the space of two lines. Her only other reference to the colour black is to an Afghan picker who speaks almost pure Aboriginal English, 'Might be little bit wattle-tree and rub on tooth'.¹⁰ The heroine of the novel hates this man and condemns him with the line, 'Pah, a black man'. And taunts him after his advances with the impossibility of his hopes, 'But a black man after all'. As if he should never have dared consider they had anything in common.

The picking industry is dominated by Aboriginal families but Langley never mentions them again, preferring to concentrate on the Italians with whom she shares almost no language but does share the knowledge of European culture, allowing them to converse through music and myth. Today's Australians still remain immersed in the stories of Prometheus and Atlas but know nothing of the Bram bram bult or the Seven Sisters.

A wonderful opportunity to uncover the secret civilisation of Australia is passed over in favour of continued reliance on the myths, music and legends of a continent separated from our land by an entire hemisphere.

Patrick White, Australia's second most famous author after Lawson, was generous toward Aboriginal people, but why shouldn't he be? His family owned half of New South Wales and like Judith Wright's family, had displaced Aboriginal people to get it. Patrick White. Another of our great republicans.

White used Aboriginal people as colour and background, mysterious beings of menace and malevolence in *Voss* and *A Fringe of Leaves*. In the latter novel, as a splash of dramatic colour, White manages to include some mythic cannibalism and treachery, drawing the people as dirty, acquisitive, ridiculous grotesques.

'The monkey-woman snatched. An almost suppressed murmuring arose as they examined the jewels they had been given, but their possessive lust was quickly appeased, or else their minds had flitted in search of further stimulus'.¹¹

If we knew our history White would have known that the gold and jewels of the British held no charm for Aborigines, that they

rejected almost all European goods except those things they already used in their culture: axes, tobacco and flour.

Western literature is considered a free agent to set its stories against any texture, any colour, any metaphor, but perhaps a time will come when Australian authors will not snatch misinformed stereotypes off the shelf to act as background to what many see as their more civilised, more important, more cognitively sophisticated white selves.

That time has not yet arrived. Peter Goldsworthy's award-winning novel of 2004, *Three Dog Night*, has a sophisticated middle-class academic opine on page 6 that all the Indigenous people around Adelaide died of smallpox. It's a throw-away line to a lover's question but if Goldsworthy had spelt the Grey in Earl Grey with an 'a' instead of an 'e' it would have provoked letters to *Australian Book Review*, earnest letters, bemoaning a fall in the standard of the Australian novel.

Characters in novels are allowed to say what they will, but would any modern novelist dare to say that the Jews at Aushwitz died of lung cancer or that Pol Pot's victims succumbed to an incredible series of workplace accidents? Goldsworthy's novel does describe Aboriginal culture more sympathetically in other parts of the text but the fact remains that page 6 reinforces a perception of Australian history which has corrupted so much Australian thought. In another part of the novel Goldsworthy reveals certain rites of Aboriginal lore where incisions are made to the penis of some initiated men. Is this included with the acknowledgment of the community or for sensational novelistic colour?

There are some things which should never be misrepresented, even in dialogue, without further qualification elsewhere in the text. As a novelist I shrink from the kind of awkward 'correctness' that might result from self-imposed editing but perhaps the solution is in better education of writers, a long draught of reality. Perhaps as leaders of the country's intellectual life artists should be determined not to delude the audience, insult Indigenous communities or allow our nation to snuggle up in the comfort zone of Theme Park History.

Tim Winton, one of the very best writers in Australia, has a benevolent black ghost in *Cloudstreet* who brings succour to the white people who now live on his land. 'The war is over, have my

land', the ghost seems to be saying, a discordant tone in a novel, which up to that point, reminded me of the integrity and power of Ruth Park's *Poor Man's Orange*. I read the reviews of both the book and the play and found only one reference to the gratuitous ghost. This view of Australian history is so pervasive that almost no-one in the whole intellectual army of the nation thought it worthy of comment.

Australian ignorance makes us want the blessing of those so ruthlessly trampled. When the blessing is received by a character like Winton's ghost of Uncle Tom the reader takes comfort and warmth from the fact that it's all okay, the blacks didn't really mind at all. *Our* blacks are *our* friends.

Why do artists and politicians think it is acceptable to refer to *our* Aboriginal people when attempting to promote some new theory of racial correction? But *our* Aborigines better watch out if any ungrateful black bastard complains about their treatment in the nation's literature. I made a few hundred new enemies at the Sydney Writers' Festival one year by questioning David Malouf's rendering of Aboriginal history and characterisation in his novel, *Remembering Babylon*. The room went silent with embarrassment. The other two panellists were asked Dorothy Dixers but no-one had a question for me. Afterwards the chairperson couldn't bear to shake the hand of such an uncultured, uneducated ingrate.

I didn't say Malouf couldn't write, I said his history was flawed and I wondered how many Aboriginal people he drew on to put flesh on his characters. After reading his essay, 'Made in England', in *Quarterly Essay* 12, 2003, I'm perplexed that in the array of influences he attributes to our national character, Aboriginal Australia is not one of them. It also came as a shock that he considered the Kanaka, South Sea Island slaves blackbirded into the Queensland sugar industry 'were indentured labourers'.¹² These questions don't call Malouf's entire body of work into question, nor does it reflect on Malouf who, from my experience, is one of the more humble and generous art practitioners in the country. The question was about Australia, not Malouf.

The market for Australian literature shrinks as we make fervent promises to America not to monster their market with our minnow.

We even agree to buy more of theirs and as a consequence our art and national esteem become slack and deferential.

Our artists, philosophers and academics are whipped from the field of public discourse and retreat to the university quadrangle at a time when we need their opinion as never before.

We need people to question the politicians and press when they refer to the Port Arthur massacre as the single greatest massacre in Australia's history or to Australia as the only continent on earth where war has never been fought. We need people to challenge sports commentators when they declare Australia's qualification for the 2006 World Cup as *the* greatest day in Australia's history. Apart from overlooking a few little things like penicillin and heart-lung transplants it underlines that Australians cannot imagine a history longer than two hundred years.

Australians believe our historical furrphies because we were taught them at our father's knee and on our good mother's lap. Our history and literature fed it to us in our baby pap.

Not all contemporary artists avoid the hard questions. Alex Miller's novel, *Journey to the Stone Country*, shows how Australians strike out one eye so they don't have to confront the past. Kate Grenville's novel, *The Secret River*, is similarly provocative and analyses the first European settlements with an eye to the human foibles of the settlers and the administration, but unfortunately the black characters are mere sketches, adjuncts to the *real* characters.

Grenville is being celebrated as if, like Fred Hollows, she had removed our cataracts. We seem to need Grenville to absolve any further scrutiny of our soul, but in fact I find the novel terribly disappointing. Like Winton, White, Lawson and Goldsworthy she is a very good writer but the scenes in England read like *Great Expectations* and the Australian scenes as if she's only ever seen pictures of black people and assumed the rest.

Both *Stone Country* and *Secret River* are entertaining reading, but I wish more Australians would read novels by Indigenous authors: *Plains of Promise* and *Carpentaria* by Alexis Wright, *Benang* by Kim Scott, and *The Kadaitcha Sung* by Sam Watson. They ask the same questions as Miller and Grenville but more of them and from the deeply informed perspective of hard experience.

In his most recent book, *Kayang and Me*, Kim Scott looks at the psychological underpinnings of some Australian authors and discusses the work of David Foster and Anson Cameron, both sensitive and innovative Australian storytellers, and finds that they offer 'stereotypical interpretations of Aboriginality' and a 'fatalistic approach to the continued existence of indigenous culture,' 'they seem to be hoping we can get over it.'¹³

Both Foster and Cameron are far too intelligent to leave the debate there but Scott has put his finger on their failure to disturb more than the surface dust of Australian culture. Let's have a decent old cultural blue, let's grab each other by the metaphorical collars, let's get in a huff and be wounded, let's debate our culture and our land instead of wasting every 'ideas conference' on the ability of Prince Charles to represent Australia.

We should be raised in households where it is expected that we read Indigenous literature so that the knowledge becomes as habitual to Australians as entering our kids in Little Athletics and Learn to Swim courses, part of the preparation for life which every Australian must experience. Let's supplement *Alien Son* and *Cry the Beloved Country* with the stories of our own blindness and cruelty so that we stop wringing our hands over the apartheid and holocausts of other lands and confront those that occur on our own sunny island.

We should never forget Soweto, we should never forget Auschwitz, but we should never pretend we did not create them here at Portland, Cocanarup, Lake Wellington and a thousand districts across the nation. Many of those incidents have never been mentioned in print since being rendered in euphemism by a colonial police magistrate's pen, the man whose primary responsibility was the division of stolen land among his mates.

At country funerals and weddings I love to look at all the old-fashioned faces, the men with their hair silver and discreetly drawn across a tanned scalp, the hands bunched on their knees like artichokes, good honest workers' hands; their women beside them with permed silver waves, neat and clean as a whistle, good people, loving people, devoted mothers and fathers and now in their advanced age delighting in buying books for their grandchildren, the books they were read themselves when they were young.

These are the people who have kept the Country Fire Association going; the football club would have folded years ago without their patronage; if the kindergarten needs a new fence you won't have to pass their door before getting an offer of assistance; his hammer and saw has seen many a poor person's veranda saved, her stove has baked more passionfruit sponge cakes and more rabbit casseroles for people in need than for her own family. Your heart bursts with pride to number them among your friends. Their brothers died gamely in front of the Turks who were astonished by the bravery and humility of these men and will tell you so today. While our men were away saving England their modest wives kept the country running: worked the plough, built the aircraft, nurtured the children. These are magnificent people, my father's mates, my mother's childhood friends; their goodness knows almost no limits. Almost.

For the great sadness is that I've sat in cars with these people and watched their lips purse at the sight of a black person, I've leant at a bar beside those massive and resourceful arms, capable of lifting a 10-foot post on their own or cradling a sick child; yes, I've stood there shoulder to shoulder with those men after the Saturday final siren has sounded and we've glowed with pride for our town. But I have dreaded the moment in the pub when the news comes on to interrupt the sport and some television channel owned by a trillionaire leads with a story of Aboriginal people burning the white picket fence that surrounds their government house, or of a wild black youth who has killed three people with his stolen car, or of a community who rebel in desperation after one of their sons is chased to his death by the police, and I've heard you say 'round them up and shoot the lot'. Out of *your* mouth, where normally I hear no malice directed at any man, that is what I hear you say, repeating your ancestors' call to arms, and I am not surprised, because I've heard it before from the lips of the eternal scone-cooking grandmother, her soft top lip dusted with the flour of charity, I've heard it muttered by team mates in football sheds, over the fence posts two good mates have laboured to erect in the blazing sun; yes, I've heard it often enough not to be surprised, but it hurts me because these people are my friends, they are a people separated from, if not greatness, then certainly goodness, by the

merest gap in their soul's generosity, and I want to believe that it isn't malice but ignorance. This is what I want to believe, because I love these people, they have nurtured and encouraged me, but there is, within many, a bitterness and hardness that suppresses any whiff of generosity to Aborigines. Some, on learning of my ancestry, find it difficult to look me in the eye again. Their discomfort and suspicion precludes further friendship: no more fence posts, no more beers after the game, no more half-hearted attempts to catch redfin in the Murray; I'm in the blacks' camp and the boss has nothing to say.

Perhaps that hardness was required on the frontier to inure these stoics not just to the hardships of frontier life but also to the necessary atrocities of land acquisition. Perhaps it's imperative that any civilisation retain the ability to scrap and slog, to release huge floods of adrenalin to protect those around them. But do we have to continue the myth of frontier life? Do we have to allow no hint of better knowledge to erode our prejudice?

We Australians.

It is fashionable to debate the Australian character with the assumption of its open-hearted simple mateship, but what might we become if our consciences allowed us to cook scones and mend the fences not just for the old and new Australians but for the original as well? To remember, every time we hear the lone bugler, that Aboriginal soldiers stood beside our troops in the trenches of hell in Europe, and found food in the bush when their Digger mates were starving at Kokoda.

To imagine what it might have been like if a few more battles had gone the way of the Japanese in World War II and it was modern Australians from whom the land was taken: the engulfing shame, the desperation visited, the overwhelming degradation. What would be in the heart if we lived beneath the yoke of scorn, how bitter would our portion of mill end rice taste then, what shame would burn our cheek to be dressed and photographed in their cast off raiment? Would we be able to shift the gorge from our throat long enough to explain to our grandchildren how we lost our land, how so many of us descended into hopeless despondency, too knotted with grief for the loss of our past, the loss of everything we'd been brought up to honour, the shame of having lost all that was entrusted to us by our grandparents? Who has the strength to

do that when the evidence of your present circumstance reminds you of the ineffectual defence of your mother's and father's land?

Despair. People wonder why Aboriginal people become ill, disrespect the law, despair. I see it in the eyes of young black men when approached by a white stranger; they are waiting for the knife, the insult, the incredulity.

White people's ignorance of Aboriginal people is so pervasive, so profound, that it exhausts the Indigenous who are forced to argue every point: well, yes we did live here before you came, no, we didn't eat our children, yes, my grandfather was murdered by your grandfather, yes, my father went to both world wars alongside yours, no he didn't get a soldier settlers' farm like yours, no, we didn't invent the wheel...or the jail, or the rack, boiling oil, or instruments to pluck out fingernails, white collar crime; there were a lot of things we didn't invent.

It's exhausting, terrifying, humiliating and eventually only the massively strong can survive the contempt, the derision, the ignorance, the syrupy sympathy.

I met a young man at the football: nice fella, smart, polite...left school at 13 because the teachers wouldn't believe his story of how long his people had been living on that shore, how they used to harvest the oysters, salmon, whales, and wouldn't believe that they didn't eat their children. That boy was sent to the Principal, made to stand in the corridor all day and then expelled. He told his story to at least three teachers and one Principal; four Australian university graduates and not one believed him.

Yes, thanks for the question, he did refuse to sit down in class, refused to stop his explanation when asked, yes he did become belligerent when ordered to repeat his claims to the Principal and yes he did refuse to cry; but he was hurt, that great Australian, and only a few know how badly.

Another young man was expelled from a Geelong school for exactly the same reason. He claimed Captain Cook didn't discover Australia. Yes, he did refuse to sit down and yes he did continue to make his claim on history in an increasingly loud voice. No, he didn't receive an apology. Some of his elders are concerned when the young poke their head up over the parapet, the survival rate being so low in a war where the armaments are so disproportionately

allocated, but, my brother, you remain a hero in my heart. Would our country not have wasted you.

When six out of six university graduates see historical conviction as insolence our country's education system is in deep trouble.

You don't have to be a sook or cry baby to acknowledge another's pain and your contribution to their humiliation. You actually need the same strength of arm and heart that cleared the farm, tore gold from the soil and leapt from the trench in the name of freedom. But I wonder if we have the ticker for it.

It is insufficient to lay blame or excuse wrong. What happened in our country was probably inevitable once Europeans began to sail big ships. The Chinese, Egyptians and the Polynesians had already mastered the navigation of open waters in large vessels, but did not embark on missions of conquest unless history hides the tale. It was the Europeans who favoured invasion of any new land they encountered.

The inevitability of that invasion was delayed for several centuries by European antipathy to the west coast but had probably been delayed even earlier by the disinclination of the Chinese and Macassans to attempt imperial assaults. But once the riches of the east coast had been found, European invasion was only one more ship away. The French or Americans would have left little to chance if the British had not decided to dump their unwanted citizens here in 1788.

An extraordinary example of the imperialism innate to Europeans was provided by the urbane Jewish novelist Abraham Yehoshua when he declared that what the Jewish people really needed was a land like Australia with discrete borders where Jews 'could live among ourselves in our own territories, clear within our borders.'¹⁴ I'm sure Yehoshua is thinking theoretically but you can see how deeply the imperial impulse lurks in European hearts.

Neither the Israelis nor the Palestinians had the luxury of imperial dreaming because at the time their oppression began every land on earth was occupied. To think that you can occupy what you deem to be empty space is a colonial assumption: there's a land inhabited by people who do not live like Europeans therefore they are unworthy of it. Every invasion has been predicated

on the unworthiness of the occupiers to retain the wealth of their inheritance.

Yehoshua was dreamily speculating but every invasion began with an imperial dreamer poring over shapes in an atlas.

If this land of discrete borders has any role in the development of modern states it is to attempt a model where all human beings are respected, where the precept of all people being born in God's image is adopted as national policy not lame religious rhetoric, and where original cultures are valued for their indispensable knowledge of place. Australia is ideal for the application of this theory of human development because, as Yehoshua has noted, it is a land of discrete borders and furthermore the crimes of dispossession are within living memory, some continuing into the present day.

Australia is perfectly placed to act as a neutral negotiating force, a country that uses its geographic isolation as a site where the international community can trace a considered way through the minefield of strife. A Hague of the south. A clearing house of peace. Instead of attempting to guarantee our security by joining the aggressions of other nations, we could provide them with a diplomatic safe haven, establish ourselves as everyone's uncle rather than some people's sheriff.

This is a land where the protagonists of our troubles can look each other in the eye and attempt to heal the sorrow and insults before the magma of the frontier furnace cools into unalterable rock and we become doomed to eternal enmity as the world currently witnesses in the Bible lands, the old Yugoslavia and a dozen other places where imperial wrongs have not been acknowledged. No country is immune from the suicide bomber and jihad, if the inhabitants of those lands have not addressed the grievances of their land, if instead they have tried to tough it out, waiting for the oppressed to be overwhelmed by their loss or to simply disappear. You cannot out wait injustice while it lives in the memory of the dispossessed. Even if the resistance is weak and purely symbolic, the corrosive nature of guilt which inhabits the hearts of the oppressors can condemn them to a future where they repeat their prejudices and admire their inhumanity, raising flags and singing songs to celebrate their renovated history.

Watch out, the white ants of self-deception are within the walls!

We need to argue about our nationhood but arguing the toss of dispossession seems futile as its accomplishment is self-evident. How do we as a nation resolve to express our history? By scrubbing out whole unpalatable events, averting our face from the dispossessed, pretending they are unworthy of God's love? Or do we aim to become a *civilised* society attempting to encompass the entire history of our existence?

Oodgeroo Noonuccal was one of those great Australian women who could scorch your eyebrows for a slip in intellectual rigour, but later nudge your hip to encourage you to get her coffee *and* cake. I interviewed her on 3RRR a couple of times and the same woman who was terrified of the community broadcaster's dark stairs would barrel you in the dim green light of the studio and lay her words down like slabs of molten metal, not crude and unformed so much as incendiary. I loved her; she could nudge my hip anytime. It was only natural that one of her best friends would be another of Australia's most intelligent women, Judith Wright.

Wright wrote of that friendship,

The knife's between us. I turn it round,
The handle to your side.
The weapon made from your country's bones,
I have no right to take it.

Judith Wright was a lover of uncommon strength and her greatest love was reserved for her country. Coming from generations of rich New England squatters never stopped her questioning her relationship with the ground of her birth. Like many of us, she learnt more about herself and that relationship from Oodgeroo than from anyone else. Australia hardly seems to have noticed that they've both gone.

Neil Murray would have noticed. Like Wright he had a passionate embrace with the country of his birth and, in trying to understand it better, found that those who could best explain its nature were not allowed to walk down the main street of his district's largest town and that their mothers and fathers had been shot just where he lived.

Murray bit the bullet. Whereas most Australians become gunshy of such knowledge Murray exposed himself to its white heat. He travelled the length and breadth of the country with the Warrumpi Band but, unlike Judith Wright, Murray does not seem to twist on the blade of regret. As Peter Read points out, 'Murray... musing on this sense of belonging, asserts his right to belong not only by acknowledging the chilling history of landscapes now empty of Aborigines...[but] his belonging derives from the accident of his birth and from his continuing responsibility to the environment.'¹⁵

Responsibility to the environment is a clunky, modern way of talking about love of land, but that is exactly what Murray means. In his song, 'Native Born,' he writes,

Australia, where have your caretakers gone?
I am just one who has been battered
By the damage within your shores,
Australia, I would not sell you for a price...
For I am your native born.

Murray is not alone; musicians like Shane Howard, Paul Kelly and Andy Baylor all explore the nature of the Australian soul, an exploration which seems to daunt so many academics and politicians paid to engage in that search. An old railway station is targeted for redevelopment in Camberwell and the protesters include an array of luminous thespians not seen since Dame Nellie's funeral; a tree in inner Carlton is to be removed to make way for a car park and outrage gushes like water from a burst main, but an announcer on Victorian ABC morning radio blandly dismisses the axing of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission and the single caller who complains is not asked about the role of Aboriginal self-determining organisations but about the character of its chairman.

It is not because all people despise all Aboriginal people but because we have been badly educated and are too comfortable with that impoverished knowledge.

The only thing of real value we can leave our children apart from our love is the truth about their inheritance. We must tell them the history of both victor and vanquished because in time it is soon forgotten which was which, and the only thing children find

Convincing Ground

significant are the deeds of their father and mother and what made them love each other. Have I been born of good people? Do my parents believe in goodness and kindness? Unconditionally?