

THE TREVOR REESE MEMORIAL LECTURE 1984

The Breaking of the Great Australian Silence: Aborigines in Australian Historiography 1955-1983

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In 1968 the distinguished anthropologist W E H Stanner delivered the annual Boyer Lectures for the Australian Broadcasting Commission. In the second lecture of the series of four, entitled 'The Great Australian Silence', he berated the nation's historians for their neglect of the Aborigines. 'Inattention on such a scale', he argued, could not possibly be explained by absent-mindedness. Rather it was:

a structural matter, a view from a window which has been carefully placed to exclude a whole quadrant of the landscape. What may well have begun as a simple forgetting of other possible views turned under habit and over time into something like a cult of forgetfulness practised on a national scale.(1)

This, the inaugural Trevor Reese Memorial Lecture, is about the breaking of the Great Australian Silence; it is about the cult of forgetfulness - how and why it arose, and, more particularly, how and why it declined after 1968.

The Great Australian Silence was a 20th century phenomenon. Most books written about the colonies in the 19th century devoted a chapter or two to the Aborigines and to their relations with the Europeans, while the few major historical works produced before 1900 gave considerable attention to the great tragedy of destruction and dispossession. But during the first half of the 20th century the Aborigines were dispersed from the pages of Australian history as effectively as the frontier squatters had dispersed them from the inland plains a century before.

Walter Murdoch, one of the most distinguished literary figures of the first half of the 20th century, captured the

national mood in an *Introductory History of Australia*, written for use in schools: "When people talk about "the history of Australia", he wrote:

they mean the history of the white people who have lived in Australia. There is good reason why we should not stretch the term to make it include the story of the dark skinned wandering tribes who hurled boomerangs and ate snakes in their native land for long ages before the arrival of the first intruders from Europe ... [The historian] is concerned with Australia only as the dwelling place of white men and women, settlers from overseas. It is his business to tell us how these white folk found the land, how they settled in it, how they explored it and how they gradually made it the Australia we know today.(2)

Murdoch's prescription for a national historiography became a common place. In most 20th century historical works little attention was given to the Aboriginal occupation of the continent in the millenia before the appearance of the White man. Typically, they began with the voyages of assorted European explorers or with the decision to send an English expedition to Botany Bay. This is true even of the most recent comprehensive academic history - Crowley's *A Uew History of Australia* - published ten years ago and still widely used. The book opens with the sentence:

Australia was conceived officially when King George III announced to parliament, on 22 January 1787, that a plan had been made "to remove the inconvenience which arose from the crowded state of the gaols in the different parts of the Kingdom".(3)

Australia's beginnings were then Georgian, British, official. There is not a word about the ancient societies in occupation of almost every comer of the vast continent in question.

Having begun the saga of settlement with the planting of the flag at Sydney Cove, the typical mid-century history made fleeting mention of the blacks around the pin-points of European settlement while a few individuals, like Bennelong, were given walk-on parts in the drama of early Sydney. Inland clans met and sometimes harassed intrepid explorers and hardy pioneers: black spears symbolizing the hostility of an alien environment there to be mastered. Many writers discussed and deplored the fate of the Tasmanian Aborigines, but after the mid-19th century interest faltered and there was little further mention of the blacks at all. Racial conflict was portrayed as a feature of the earliest period of Australian history, with little relevance to the present. I can still remember my surprise when first reading Trevor Reese's book, *Australia in the 20th Century*, while preparing a course of lectures in 1967, though it had come out three years before, because it included a whole chapter on the Aborigines and related modern conditions to developments stretching back to the first years of settlement. More typical of the period was the address given to a conference of historians in 1959 by Professor J A La Nauze, entitled 'The Study of Australian History 1929-1959'. Surveying thirty years of national historiography, La Nauze emphasised some of the distinctive features of the country's development, including the fact that 'unlike the Maori, the American Indian or the South African Bantu, the Australian Aboriginal is noticed in our history only in a melancholy anthropological footnote'.(4) In the multi-authored *Australia: A Social and Political History*(5), published in 1955 to commemorate the jubilee of federation four years earlier, the Aborigines were scarcely noticed. Mentioned in passing once or twice, they did not warrant an entry in the index.

Such, then, was the Great Australian Silence, such the cult of forgetfulness.

Why were the Aborigines written out of the historical record early this century? Many influences were probably at work. Some of the major ones can be noted here. Until the 1940s, the overwhelming opinion - both popular and scientific - was that the blacks were 'dying out', condemned by the iron laws of evolution to eventual extinction. With only a minor black role in the present and none in the future, the Aboriginal past could be discounted. Early 20th century history was self-consciously nationalistic, written to foster patriotism in the present, pride in the past. Racial violence was an embarrassment, best forgotten, especially as the heroes of the pioneer legend - squatters, prospectors, explorers, overlanders - had helped to bloody the billabongs. To create doubts about the means of European occupation was to question the morality of settlement, even the right to the continent. Such questions had no place in works which celebrated steady material progress, the creation of free institutions, and the evolution of a happy, hedonistic life-style.

The last 15 years have seen dramatic changes in both the attention devoted to the Aborigines and to the whole character of Australian historiography. Stimulus for change came from many sources. Australia has been influenced by the world-wide reassessment of European imperialism which followed in the wake of decolonization and third-world assertiveness. Indigenous minorities embedded in European settler societies - American Indians, Maoris, Aborigines - have linked arms, assessments and aspirations. Aboriginal political activism has challenged

assumptions about the past as surely as it has questioned contemporary attitudes and current policies. The establishment of the Tent Embassy on the lawns of Parliament house in Canberra in 1972 and the unfurling of the Aboriginal flag were events resonant with historical as well as political significance. The pivotal issue of land-rights is, above all, about history. Its roots go back to the first days at Sydney Cove when the colonists, adopting the view that Australia was *terra nullius* - a land without legitimate owners - annexed a continent of which they knew less than one hundredth part. The Aborigines and their supporters are not only struggling for land but for a radical reinterpretation of the past as well. On the other hand, the results of the new historical scholarship reach far beyond the study and the conference room, feeding both political and cultural springs of the Aboriginal Renaissance.

But to return to more specific questions: What changes have taken place in our view of the Aboriginal past? Which developments overwhelmed the historian's cult of forgetfulness?

Australian pre-history has been transformed in the last 20 years. In 1959, when La Nauze referred his colleagues to their melancholy anthropological footnote, there had been almost no archaeological work done in Australia. What archaeology existed was old-world archaeology. The first university appointment in Australian pre-history was not made until 1961. At that time the Aborigines were thought to have been in the continent for 10,000 years. Since then our view of ancient Australia has been totally reshaped. Pre-history has become a field of intense activity, of intellectual

excitement, of popular interest. These developments were summarized in a recent article published in the journal *World Archaeology*:

In 1961 the oldest date was some 9»000 years, by 1968 four sites older than 20,000 years were known and by the early 1970Ts at least two sites older than 50,000 years were accepted. For the last five years, 50,000 years has been generally agreed on as a likely limit, though a few believe that considerably greater antiquity will be rewarded.(6)

When set against a history of such depth, the European era in Australia shrinks in significance, representing a mere one half of one per cent of the time of human occupation - only 8 generations out of 1600.

But it is not the great antiquity of Aboriginal society alone that has impressed contemporary scholars but also the evidence of creative adaptation to a vast and varied continent over periods of dramatic environmental change. D J Mulvaney's book. *The Prehistory of Australia*, was probably the first work to draw this to the attention of a wider audience. Australia, he wrote in the introduction,

stretches about 45° south latitude to within 11 degrees of the equator, while a third of the continent lies within the Tropics; in recent times an equal area has received an average rainfall of less than ten inches; it is further from Perth to Melbourne than the distance separating London and Moscow. The dispersal of the Aborigines throughout this vast land, their responses and adjustments to the challenges of its harsh environment, and their economical utilization of its niggardly resources, are stimulating testimony to the achievements of the human spirit.(7)

In the opening sentence of the book, Mulvaney directly challenged traditional historiography, with its emphasis on the achievements of the European explorer and pioneer. 'The discoverers, explorers and colonists of the three million square miles which are Australia', he wrote, 'were its Aborigines.'⁽⁸⁾

The dramatic discovery of a vast pre-history was important enough in itself. Its significance was increased because it coincided with an international reassessment of the nature of hunter-gatherer societies summed up in the phrase 'the original affluent society', coined by the celebrated American anthropologist Marshall Sahlins. In Australia, this radical re-evaluation was popularised by historian Geoffrey Blainey in a book celebrating the 'Triumph of the Nomads'.⁽⁹⁾ At the same time there has been a wide-ranging reassessment of Aboriginal land use spanning many disciplines. The Aborigines now appear not the aimless wanderers of traditional accounts but as people who systematically exploited their environment by means of a profound knowledge of its resources. In open grasslands the local clans harvested vast fields of self-sown yams and indigenous cereals. On sea coasts and permanent rivers sophisticated fish traps were constructed; in the Western District of Victoria, archaeologists have discovered a massive system of canals and drains which allowed exploitation of eels passing from fresh water lagoons to the sea. We have also come to appreciate the importance of the controlled and systematic use of fire over many generations in shaping the Australian environment. The lightly timbered eucalypt woodlands which first attracted the sheep farmers were not an

untouched wilderness but a human artifact shaped by centuries of deliberate 'firestick farming'. The implications for traditional historiography are clear. European settlers did not tame a pristine continent but turned a usurped land to new uses. While exploring its surface and testing its potential, they followed Aboriginal paths, drank at their wells, slept in their gunyahs, and were highly dependent on the sophisticated bushcraft of black guides. Writing of the south-west corner of the continent, the pre-historian Sylvia Hallam emphasised that local blacks had 'opened up' the landscape in which the settlers were able to 'move around, to pasture their flocks, to find good soils ... and water sources'. The Europeans, she argued, 'inherited the possibilities of settlement and land use' from the people they dispossessed.(10)

Other certainties are currently under siege. Even such a basic fact as the size of the pre-1788 population is in dispute. Radcliffe-Browne's estimate of 500,000 has been widely accepted as the most likely figure since published in the Australian Year Book of 1950. But now one of Australia's leading economic historians has argued that the population was probably much larger. Concentrating on south-east Australia, N G Butlin asserts that all previous assessments have paid too little attention to the devastating impact of the two smallpox epidemics of the 1790s and 1829-31, and that we need to multiply previously accepted figures by four or five, that ancient Australia may have had a population as high as one and half million.(11) Prominent pre-historians, taking account of the most recent work on Aboriginal land use, concede that Butlin may be closer to the mark than the 1950

estimate he has so vigorously challenged.

In the last 20 years Australian scholars have broken the Great Australian Silence and in so doing have transformed our knowledge of the Aboriginal past - multiplying the time of human settlement by four or five, challenging accepted notions of population density, reassessing alike our view of the quality of life of individual hunters and gatherers and the creative achievements of Aboriginal society as a whole.

But what of more recent history - of the relations between the Aborigines and the European interlopers?

While archaeologists have employed a wide range of new techniques to unlock the ancient past, historians, uncovering new source material and asking fresh questions of old, are examining the Aboriginal response to European invasion and settlement, are exploring the other side of the frontier. At the same time there is a tremendous upsurge of interest in the past among Aboriginal communities seeking to preserve their history, both for its own sake and to buttress claims to traditional land.

Much research awaits to be done but it is now possible to piece together a generalised picture of the impact of the European settlement. There are numerous stories of the awe and alarm felt by coastal people at the arrival of the first sailing ships. Swan River Aborigines told confidantes among the early settlers

with great vividness their impressions when they saw the first ship approach the land.

They imagined it some huge winged monster of the deep, and there was a universal consternation. One man fled inland for fourteen miles without stopping and spread the terrifying news amongst his friends.(12)

Europeans have left many accounts of first meetings with Aborigines in which the actors on both sides display that uneasy amalgam of anxiety and curiosity, the sudden, unpredictable shifts from amity to aggression and back again, the mutual discovery of commonality and novelty. 'We were so novel to one another', wrote the French scientist Péron of his meeting with the Tasmanians in 1802.(13) As in other parts of Australia, the island Aborigines were fascinated by the Europeans' white skins, their clothes and shoes and strange possessions. The gender of the fully clothed, clean shaven Frenchmen was a matter of earnest debate and insistent exploration. As Péron explained:

the natives wanted to examine the calves of our legs and our chests, and so far as these were concerned we allowed them to do everything they wished, oft repeated cries expressing the surprise which the whiteness of our skin seemed to arouse in them. But soon they wished to carry their researches further. Perhaps they had doubts whether we were the same sort of beings as themselves, perhaps they suspected we were of a different sex. However it may be, they showed an extreme desire to examine our genital organs, but as this examination was equally displeasing to us all, they insisted only in the case of Citizen Michel, one of our sailors, who by his slight build and lack of beard seemed he must be more likely to set their minds at rest. But Citizen Michel, who I begged to submit to their entreaties, suddenly exhibited such striking proof of his virility that they all uttered loud cries of surprise mingled with loud roars of laughter which were repeated again and again.(14)

But the experience of coastal clans was not typical. For most Aborigines the Europeans did not arrive unannounced. News of them travelled inland well in advance of the wave of settlement, while straying domestic animals and assorted European commodities long preceded the bullock drays into the interior. We know that iron, glass and cloth, axes and tobacco were received by Aborigines far in the interior as long as 50 years before the appearance of the first permanent settlers, having passed along the traditional trade routes which criss-crossed the continent. Iron and glass were quickly and successfully incorporated into traditional tool kits. Skilfully crafted glass spear heads were fitted to traditional shafts, sharpened scraps of iron were hatted with wooden handles. European animals escaped from settlements all around the continent and strayed into the interior. There are many stories which relate the Aborigines' amazement and fear when they came face to face with the exotic animals. A North Queensland story tells of a meeting with a stray horse some time during the middle of last century:

Somebody lost a horse - first time they ever saw a horse ... and they got their spears and boomerangs and nulla-nullas and they chased this horse and they speared the horse and they put so many spears in the horse that the old horse fell down. And they walked up and had a look at him and they lift his head up and said "What sort of creature is this?" They never seen an animal so big. They said "I wonder where this animal has come from its so big". (15)

Information about the white men also travelled quickly back from the fringes of European settlement. News of the

danger and mysterious power of guns passed on to tribes all over the continent before they came into physical contact with Europeans. Explorers found that blacks were highly apprehensive of guns, even before they had been fired. The artist and writer Dick Roughsey recalled that, on Momington Island in the Gulf of Carpentaria, his father was told of guns before he had seen white men. Mainland blacks had related

how white people could kill a man with
thunder that sent down invisible spears
to tear a hold in his body and spill his
blood in the sand. (16)

The origin and nature of the white men provoked an intense debate in Aboriginal society. Initially it was commonly thought that Europeans were spirits returned from the dead, although eventually it was concluded that they were 'nothing but men'. All over the continent in areas of early settlement the Aborigines applied to Europeans traditional terms meaning ghost, spirit, departed, the dead. In many cases whites were thought to be not merely reincarnated blacks but actually returned relatives, a fact which often saved the lives of convict escapees and wrecked sailors as well as shielding fragile infant settlement from black hostility. Settlers so designated were given the names of recently deceased relatives and the vacant place in the kinship network. George Grey, explorer and later colonial Governor, related his experience in Western Australia when claimed as the son of an old Aboriginal woman:

A sort of procession came up, headed by
two women, down whose cheeks tears were
streaming. The eldest of these came up
to me, and looking for a moment at me

said ... "Yes, yes, in truth it is him",
and then throwing her arms around me, cried
bitterly, her Head resting on my breast ...
she then cried a little more, and at length
relieving me, assured me that I was the
ghost of her son, who had some time before
been killed by a spear wound in his breast
... My new mother expressed almost as much
delight at my return to my family, as my
real mother would have done, had I been
unexpectedly restored to her.(17)

Recent studies from all parts of Australia have emphasised the ubiquity of frontier conflict. The traditional picture of peaceful pioneering by unarmed frontiersmen has been shattered. Frontier settlements bristled with guns and almost every district settled during the 19th century had a history of conflict between local clans and encroaching settlers. A small town pioneer explained in 1869 that his community 'had its foundations cemented in blood'.(18) Another looked back ruefully on a decade of frontier conflict during which 'our cowardly fears led us to believe that our only safety lay in reckless appeals to powder and lead'.(19) Black resistance in its many forms was an inescapable feature of life on the fringes of European settlement from the first months at Sydney Cove until the early decades of the 20th century. Edward Curr, pioneer, squatter and amateur ethnographer, provided an overview of Australian frontier warfare. Writing in 1885, he explained:

In the first place the meeting of the
Aboriginal tribes of Australia and the
white pioneer, results as a rule in war,
which lasts from six months to ten years,
according to the nature of the country,
the amount of settlement which takes
place in a neighbourhood, and the

proclivities of the individuals concerned. When several squatters settle in proximity, and the country they settle is easy of access and without fastnesses to which the Blacks can retreat, the period of warfare is usually short and the bloodshed not excessive. On the other hand, in districts which are not easily traversed on horseback, in which the Whites are few in numbers and food is procurable by the Blacks in fastnesses, the term is usually prolonged and the slaughter more considerable.(20)

In the early stages of contact, conflict often resulted from mutual fear, anxiety and misunderstanding. Once settlement had been established, deaths occurred in the course of conflict about property. Innumerable small skirmishes involving European possessions which, on the surface, appear to be little more than unseemly brawls, were manifestations of a fundamental conflict between the Aboriginal concept of reciprocity and sharing and the European one of private property. Many whites were put to death in revenge for specific injuries or for serious transgression of traditional law, frequently relating to sexual relations between Aboriginal girls and womanless frontiersmen. Such action was aimed at particular individuals or groups of offenders with the intention of inducing them to behave in morally acceptable ways. Initially, then, the blacks attempted to deal with the Europeans as though they were Aborigines. Their actions were judicial rather than martial. But, as violence escalated and European competition for land and water intensified, many Aboriginal groups moved decisively from feud to warfare, engaging in concerted guerrilla attacks on the settlers, their crops and flocks, huts and herds.

Considering the advantages possessed by the Europeans, Aboriginal resistance was surprisingly prolonged and effective, exacting a high price from many pioneer communities in tension and insecurity as much as in property loss, injury or death. Aboriginal attacks on property had devastating effects on the fortunes of individual settlers, and at times appeared to threaten the economic viability of pioneer industries - squatting, farming, mining and pearling. There were occasions - as in Tasmania in the late 1820s, New South Wales in the late 1850s and early 1840s, and Queensland in the early 1860s - when Aboriginal resistance emerged as one of the major problems of colonial society. An editorial in Queensland's leading newspaper in 1879 assessed the impact of Aboriginal resistance in the colony:

During the last four or five years the human life and property destroyed by the Aborigines in the North totals up to a serious amount ... settlement on the land, and the development of the mineral and other resources of the country, have been in a great degree prohibited by the hostility of the blacks, which still continues with undiminished spirit.(21)

Yet Europeans were only rarely willing to recognize the intelligence and courage which informed the resistance. When they did their comments were particularly interesting. In 1850 a writer in the Hobart paper *The Colonial Times* referred to 'a cunning and superiority of tactics which would not disgrace some of the greatest military characters'.(22) Another island settler remarked that the blacks had 'oftentimes evinced superior tact and clearness of head'.(23) The official Tasmanian Aborigines Committee thought the blacks a 'subtle

and daring enemy', a 'sagacious and wily race of people'.(24)

A report of 1851 observed that the island blacks

now conduct their attacks with a surprising organization, and with unexampled cunning, such indeed is their local information and quickness of perception, that all endeavours on the part of the whites to cope with them are unavailing. (25)

In 1854 Governor Stirling informed his superiors in England that West Australian settlers had found the blacks 'very formidable enemies, and if they could avail themselves of the advantages of combination it would be useless to attempt a settlement in this quarter with our present numbers'.(26)

A pioneer colonist concurred, remarking in 1855 that, in addition to their knowledge of the country, the local Aborigines had 'firearms and a little discipline', they would 'put an end to the settlement in less than a month'. (27)

But perhaps the most generous tribute was paid by Edward Eyre, who wrote:

It has been said, and is generally believed, that the natives are not courageous. There could not be a greater mistake ... nor do I hold it to be any proof that they are cowards, because they dread or give way before Europeans and their firearms. So unequal a match is no criterion of bravery, and yet even thus, among natives, who were labouring under the feelings, naturally produced by seeing a race they were unacquainted with, and weapons that dealt death as if by magic, I have seen many instances of an open manly intrepidity of manner and bearing, and a proud unquailing glance of eye, which instinctively stamped upon my mind the conviction that the individuals before me were very brave men.(28)

The cost of frontier conflict was high. It seems probable that about 2,000 Europeans and more than 20,000 Aborigines died violently in the course of Australian settlement, and many others carried scars of shot and spear with them into a more peaceful era. Such a degree of violence may surprise outsiders less than it has Australians raised on historical works which stressed peacefulness of national development. Australia was the 'quiet continent', which had been colonised, not conquered; settled not invaded. The numbers killed greatly overshadowed those involved in all other forms of internal conflict and can only be compared with the death rate in Australia's overseas wars. Many white Australians are acutely embarrassed by the findings of the new history of the frontier. They would prefer that past bloodshed be forgotten. But in black communities memories are fresh and the wounds have not healed. Oral history has already tapped some of these sagas of bitter skirmish and sudden death. As an example I turn to a story of the 1870s or 1880s related a few years ago by an old man who had probably heard it as a boy from eye witnesses to the events. It tells of an attack by the Queensland Native Police on a group of Aborigines who had taken bullocks from nearby settlers and were caught while cooking them. Such 'dispersals' happened many times in colonial Queensland. Despite the lapse of time, despite the broken English, the story has a powerful impact.

All the Native Police come up All got
rifle, all got handcuffs
Shoot im altogether, Shoot im altogether
Chuck im in the fire
All the revolvers going on Talk about
smell
Nobody gonna be alive Chuck im in the
fire, half alive Sing out

Native police shoot im all Widow come
back cryin She lose im husband All
finished, they shot em live All cryin
come home To this valley here (29)

But conflict and resistance are not the only notable feature of the Other Side of the Frontier. There is much else besides. Enough work has been done in the last ten years for us to see that the Aboriginal response to invasion was far more positive, creative and complex than generations of white Australians have been taught to believe. W K Hancock's judgement of 1950 that Aboriginal society was 'pathetically helpless'(30) when assailed by Europeans can now be seen to have been a travesty. Indeed, the story which is now emerging is one which has many parallels with the chosen themes of nationalist historiography.

The courage of European explorers pushing out into the interior was matched by that of the Aborigines who met them on the way and by those who travelled in towards the settlements to observe and evaluate the interlopers. Voyages of discovery were never the preserve of white frontiersmen. The explorers' fear of savages was echoed in Aboriginal alarm about evil spirits and malignant alien magic. The improvisation and adaptation of Europeans settling the land was paralleled by tribesmen who grappled with a new world of experience on the fringes of white settlement. The stoical endurance of pioneer women was matched by that of their black sisters who bore children and battled to keep them alive in conditions of stark adversity. All over the continent Aboriginals bled as profusely and died as bravely as white soldiers in Australia's 20th century wars. How Australians

will relate frontier conflict to cherished military traditions, to the ANZAC legend itself, has yet to be determined. Will white Australians come to accept fallen tribesmen as national heroes who died defending their way of life against powerful invaders? Will their actions ultimately seem more relevant than those Australians who died overseas pursuing the tactical ends and strategic objectives of a distant motherland. That such questions now confront us is the clearest indication that the Great Australian Silence has been shattered, the cult of forgetfulness abandoned. Slowly, unevenly, often with difficulty, white Australians are incorporating the black experience into their image of the national past.

Earlier in the lecture I observed how often history merges with politics, how frequently the past and the present intersect. Thus the achievements of the new historiography must be sought in the public as well as the private sphere, in the street as much as in the seminar room. Current political activity provides apt illustration. The Land Rights Movement seeks to reverse, in part, the annexation of 1788 and gain compensation for generations of deprivation and oppression. A committee of prominent white Australians has called for a treaty or Makarata to be signed with Aboriginal leaders in time for the Bi-Centenary in January 1988. The manifesto of the committee contains the observation:

We believe there is a deep and wide concern among Australians of European descent that our ownership of this land, as defined in the imported European law, should still be based solely upon force ... It is time to strike away the past and make a just settlement together.(31)

More recent, and even more relevant, was the speech delivered by the federal minister for Aboriginal Affairs, Clyde Holding, a few weeks ago, entitled *Aboriginal Past: Australia's Future*. 'We have to admit and accept the past', Holding argued, 'we have, only recently, begun to admit to ourselves that the widely accepted version of our beginnings, of the white man bringing the benefits of civilization to benighted heathens, is rather less than the whole truth.' He believed that the approaching Bi-Centenary provided Australians with the opportunity 'not merely to contemplate our achievements as a nation, but also to come to terms with our history'. (32)

It is now 25 years since La Nauze concluded that the Aborigines were noticed in national historiography only as a melancholy anthropological footnote. Since then, many scholars in numerous disciplines have transformed our knowledge and understanding of Aboriginal Australia in the past and in the present. It has been one of the major achievements of Australian intellectual and cultural life since the Second World War. In giving up their cult of forgetfulness, white Australians have accepted a less flattering image of their past but a much more realistic one. In coming face to face with black Australians they have at last come face to face with themselves.

The problems and the issues dealt with in this lecture will continue to disturb Australian life between now and the Bi-Centenary - exactly four years away. I have no doubt that the Australian Studies Centre will play an important part in the activities which will mark that event. By then I am sure

the annual Trevor Reese Lecture will be established as an event of major importance, and the 5th Lecture of 1988 will be one of the most significant intellectual landmarks of the 200th year since the British established their beach-head at Sydney Cove.

Notes

1. *After the Dreaming* (Australian Broadcasting Commission; Sydney, 1969), p 25.
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5. F K Crowley (ed), *A New History of Australia* (Heinemann: Melbourne, 1974), p 1.
4. J A La Nauze, "The Study of Australian History 1929-59", *Historical Studies*. Vol IX, No 33, November 1959, p 11.
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7. D J Mulvaney, *The Pre-History of Australia* (Thames & Hudson: London, 1969), p 12.
8. *Ibid.*
9. *Triumph of the Nomads. A History of Ancient Australia* (Sun Books: Melbourne, 1975).
10. S Hallam, *Fire and Hearth* (Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, Canberra), p 65.
11. N G Butlin, *Our Original Aggression* (Alien & T Inwin: Sydney, 1983).
12. G F Moore, *A Descriptive Bibliography of the Language in Common Usage Among the Aborigines of Western Australia* (London, 1842), p 108.
13. N J B Plomley (ed). *The Baudin Expedition & the Tasmanian Aborigines 1802* (Blubber Head Press: Hobart, 1983), p 84.
14. *Ibid.*
15. H Reynolds, *The Other Side of the Frontier* (Penguin Books: Ringwood, Victoria, 1982), p 10.
16. D Roughsey, *Moon and Rainbow* (Rigby: Sydney, 1971), p 13.
17. G Grey, *Journal of Two Expeditions of Discovery*. 2 vols (London, 1841). Vol I, pp 301-302.

18. *Port Denis on Times*. 1 May 1869.
19. *Ibid.*, 21 May 1870.
20. E Curr, *The Australian Race; its Origin. Languages. Customs*. 4 vols (Melbourne, 1886-87), I, p 100.
21. *Queenslander*. 15 February 1879.
22. 16 July 1830.
25. *The Colonial Times*. 1 June 1831.
24. Papers of the Aborigines Committee, Tasmanian Colonial Secretary Papers, Tasmanian State Archives, CSO/1/319.
25. Papers Relative to the Aboriginal Tribes in British Possessions, Parliamentary Papers, 1834, p 158.
26. Dispatches to Colonial Office, 14 September 1834; 6 December 1838; Battye Library, Perth.
27. Perth Gazette. 30 March 1833.
28. E J Eyre, *Journals of Expeditions of Discovery*. 2 vols (London, 1845), II, pp 216-217. _____
29. H Reynolds, *op. cit.*, p 127.
50. W K Hancock, *Australia*, (Jacaranda Press: Brisbane, 1960), p 20.
51. S Harris, *It's Coming Yet* (Aboriginal Treaty Committee: Canberra, 1979), p 12.
52. Speech to House of Representatives, 8 December 1983.

That breaks the Australian silence. Near the end of apartheid, black South Africans were being jailed at the rate of 851 per 100,000 of population. Today, black Australians are being jailed at a national rate that is more than five times higher. Western Australia jails Aboriginal men at eight times the apartheid figure. In 1983, Eddie Murray was killed in a police cell in Wee Waa in New South Wales by "a person or persons unknown". That's how the coroner described it. Eddie was a rising rugby league star. Silences can be broken, if we will it. In one of the greatest poems of the English language, Percy Shelley wrote this: Rise like lions after slumber In unvanquishable number. It's 50 years since the anthropologist W.E.H. Stanner gave the 1968 Boyer Lectures "a watershed moment for Australian history. Stanner argued that Australia's sense of its past, its very collective memory, had been built on a state of forgetting, which couldn't be explained by absent-mindedness: It is a structural matter, a view from a window which has been carefully placed to exclude a whole quadrant of the landscape. What may well have begun as a simple forgetting of other possible views turned under habit and over time into something like a cult of forgetfulness practised on a national scale. Australian Aborigines, the original inhabitants of the continent of Australia, took up residence there at least 40,000 years before Europeans landed at Botany Bay in 1788. In 1788, the Aborigines were clearly the majority, numbering around 300,000. Relations between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal inhabitants of Australia have not been very good, and there is a great deal of resentment on the part of many Aboriginal people for the treatment their ancestors received from the European colonists. In February 2008, Prime Minister Kevin Rudd formally apologized to Aboriginal peoples for mistreatment by the Australian government in the past.