



A Dark History: Thoughts on Australia

I

Australians seriously lack a sense of seriousness. And urgency. Have we ever paused to consider what we are doing on this land? And doing to it? Judging ourselves successful by the narrow criteria of wealth-building and civil polity, when it comes to vision, we drift. Dinosaur ideologies of Left and Right continue to delimit our thinking.

Glance at the letters column in any major Australian newspaper. Australians are not a people given to understanding each other or given to sympathise with a view different from our own. We lack a discourse of compassion, reverence and respect. And underneath it all, we have no heart, not even a taste, for tragedy.

By seriousness I mean the quality of witness I observed at a church service in Berlin more than forty years ago. No social outing there. Instead, an intensive hour of worship, listening, and a striving to understand. Where in this country do I find a capacity for suffering and tragedy? Emily Dickinson wrote, 'I like a look of agony because I know it's true', and 'The distant strains of triumph/Burst agonised and clear'. I am seeking these capacities in the words and faces of others. I search in books and writings.

Occasionally I make a discovery. Manning Clark's two volumes of autobiography record his aching lifelong search for answers to those root questions of existence that haunt the haunted throughout their lives. For Clark, those questions were never to allow him rest.

Kevin Gilbert writes:

... the human desolation that is Aboriginal Australia is not yet understood in this country ... The original Aboriginal people lived in a delicate ecological balance with their environment. This balance allowed them to follow a way of life that set them free from material burdens so that they could lead an extraordinarily rich spiritual life. The traditional Aboriginal was drunk on religion, intoxicated by the metaphysics expressed through the physical features of his land.

The European invasion quickly destroyed the balance between Aboriginal and nature as the land was taken and the ecology altered by the introduction of cattle and sheep ... The loss of land meant the loss of a metaphysics too, because the two were inextricable.

As Aborigines began to sicken physically and psychologically, they were hit by the full blight of an alien way of thinking. They were hit by the intolerance and uncomprehending barbarism of a people intent only on progress in material terms, a people who never credited that there could be cathedrals of the spirit as well as of stone.

We are still so close to it. Six generations take us back into the heart of darkness. Let us travel a little further to the arrival of the First Fleet. The journey over those strange uncertain seas lasted for

JOHN MARTIN muses on white Australia's incapacity to grasp the depth of Aboriginal connection to country.

months. Upon making landfall, what lay in the minds of the travellers?

Terror, fear, uneasiness, uncertainty. Trees, plants, the very quality of light, the weird animals and birds, natives speaking an incomprehensible language, the sun in the north, not a building, street or bridge, no anchoring point, no sign. What the hell are we doing here? What is this place? Exile. Exile from a known land, a known people, a known culture. They may as well have been on Jupiter.

Yet there was work to be done, work for their very survival. The landing secured, the Europeans and their animals spread throughout the continent, amassing wealth, generating poverty. The practice of the Christian religion, with a few noble exceptions, proved incapable of halting theft and slaughter.

Whether acknowledged or not, whether denied or accepted, the facts remain: theft of land from peoples who understood their inalienable title to it. Unfortunately, the words I write and their grammatical structure fail to carry the weight of what I wish to say. We do not have words in English nor an encompassing metaphysic by which to express this relation of person to country. We must rely, therefore, on Aboriginal accounts. In a short essay,

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'Strangers at Home', Kim Scott explains his writing 'as a struggle to match the English language with a non-verbal sense of self and heritage'. In his attempt to learn the language (Noongar) of his progenitors, he writes of 'the possibility of reshaping oneself from the inside out, of making oneself an instrument of place, particularly when the language is onomatopoeic'. Despite the brevity of his piece, I receive an image of languages that insinuate themselves upon the land and weave their way around it through the speaking and singing voice. The languages round out the landforms with that further dimension of sound. The link between person and natural feature in some (many?) cases is intimate. Kim Scott relates that his Auntie Hazel told him 'the Noongar word for river is bily. It's also the word for navel'.

The English language — any language — is as a river that bears us along — that is, if we fail to pause and ponder the way in which that language predisposes us to think.* It is a simple matter to see how the 'I' plays such a prominent part in English, such that we habitually see ourselves as the authors of our acts.

I run. I think. I work.

I act on a world.

This fact of grammar has, and has had, I believe,

profound implications for the way in which we are led to both view and treat our world. A linguist friend, Christina Eira, writes:

... in so-called nominative-accusative languages, such as European languages, the default or unmarked party is the agent changing their world, while in ergative languages, which includes most Australian languages at least in part, the default is the actor moving with their world. I say 'in part' because many languages have a 'split ergative' system, while others use nominative-accusative ... in some cases the split is along the lines of animacy — here referring to a grammaticalised concept of who or what is more or less animate.

'... more or less animate'. These words provide the key to the following passage by Deborah Bird Rose, quoted in Jan Critchett's *Untold Stories*.

Country in Aboriginal English is not only a common noun but also a proper noun. People talk about country in the same way they would talk about a person: they speak to country, sing to country, visit country, worry about country, feel sorry for country, and long for country. People say that country knows, hears, smells, takes notice, takes care, is sorry or happy ...

Each country has its own people, its own law, its own way of life ... In Aboriginal Australia each country is surrounded by other countries. The boundaries are rarely absolute; differences are known, respected and culturally elaborated in many ways. As David Turner says, Aboriginal Australia is made up of a series of 'promised lands' each with its own 'chosen people'.

(By contrast, up here in the Wimmera region of Victoria, a patch of trees is referred to as 'the timber'. In a linguistic tweak, a clump of trees is not only extracted from total field but converted to use-value.)

These words of Deborah Bird Rose hook in with Bill Randall's account of the social and metaphysical world of his nation. He writes of 'Kanyini' — the principle of connectedness that runs through the whole of creation. To be more than a concept, Kanyini must incarnate itself in the human heart through the practice of unconditional love towards all things.

We are here very far from the anthropocentrism of Western philosophy.

II

We tear at our land, heeding not the warnings of those who know.

'Uranium there. Leave it alone. Green Ant Dreaming.'

'Water spirits there. Don't disturb.'

We always find ourselves in the desert, in Australia, even in the hearts of our two great cities. And deep within lives that shame that no amount of distraction, no amount of funsterism, no amount of sardonic humour, has the power to dismiss. We suffer, as Australians, more than

most from 'culture's past'. We are still so close to it. It is my hope that over the next century or so we might all come to experience that melancholy — or maturity of soul — so well expressed by Nietzsche.

Whoever has clearly understood the problem of culture suffers from a feeling similar to that of a man who has inherited riches that were acquired through illegal means, or a prince who rules because of his father's atrocities. He thinks of his origin with sadness, and is often ashamed, often irritable. The whole sum of the strength, will to life, and joy that he expends on his estate is often balanced by a deep weariness: he knows that his descendants will suffer the past as he does.

How, then, does this country sit, in terms of a national identity and future project?

Manning Clark, in his chapter 'Convicts and the Faith of Founders', in Volume 1, *A History of Australia*, finds the origin of Australian values in a mix of Catholicism, Protestantism (notably the evangelical strain), the Enlightenment vision ('the enlightenment taught "this-sidedness", or the capacity of men and women to achieve happiness here on earth ...') and finally, in 'the men and

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women who were untouched by any of these enthusiasms — the men of common-sense. They accepted the Roman virtues of courage, stoicism, endurance; they disdained religion as a consolation for human suffering, and condemned its followers for their lack of strength and courage ...'

Yet all of them, he suggests, 'bore the taint of supercilious intolerance towards all other forms of civilisation'. It is this observation that constitutes the heart of our shame.

The people of the First Fleet and their followers were products of the thinking of the Industrial Revolution — pragmatic, businesslike believers (maybe) in the tramp of material progress. And from a world which endorsed slavery. Yet nestled in our minds — and even more fatal to the original inhabitants — is an idea whose provenance has been scarcely explored. This is the notion of 'land' — of what it is, of what we can do with it, and what we should do with it.

Although concepts of land and property ownership concerned thinkers before the time of John Locke (1632–1704), it is in his writings that we find an explicit treatment of the subject. The crucial argument is to be

found in the chapter 'Of Property' in Locke's *Second Treatise on Civil Government*. Locke assumes the earth as given to the human species 'in common'. But if this is so, how does anyone come to have any personal entitlement to a portion of it? He proceeds by a curious argument based upon the notion of 'the individual' whose labour of course is 'his own'. If I 'mix' my labour with the material of the earth, the land I work becomes 'mine' and anything that — through my labour — the land produces, is also mine. To counter the charge that this merely sanctions the acts of the greedy and powerful, Locke restricts ownership only to those fruits or products that can be 'enjoyed before they spoil'.

He makes a virtue of 'work,' and assumes there is land — and more than enough — for all.

We trace a line back to Locke by the manner in which our culture pursues its comforts and conveniences.

We trace a line back to Locke (and others) in the value we place upon pragmatic reasoning.

We trace a line back to Locke (and earlier to Calvin) in terms of our valuation of labour (and the virtue attached to it).

Nevertheless we live in the twenty-first century. We in Australia live within — not outside — Aboriginality in all its richness and complexity. We live in a world demanding of order, limit, proportion. We live in a world that is finite. We live in a world infinitely more complex than that dreamed of in Locke's philosophy. Yet this thinking continues to hold us in thrall.

Possessors of stolen booty forever sleep uneasy.

Inheritors, too.

The fear of invasion lies deep in each Australian soul. (We set up fortifications and gun embrasures at Port Phillip Heads in the early 20th century to ready ourselves for a possible Russian invasion.) How can we open up to country if our primary mental tools comprise the empiricism of Locke, imported religions and a ferocious technology?

R. D. Laing, in the course of characterising what he calls 'ontological insecurity', describes three variants of anxiety, one of which is 'engulfment':

A firm sense of one's own autonomous identity is required in order that one may be related as one human being to another. Otherwise any and every relationship threatens the individual with a loss of identity. In this the individual dreads relatedness as such, *with anyone or anything*, or, indeed, even with himself, because his uncertainty about the stability of his autonomy lays him open to the dread lest in any relationship he will lose his autonomy and identity. [My emphasis.]

A personal anecdote may be useful here. A few years ago my wife and I were visiting the Lake District in England. It was late afternoon. I was sitting alone on a bench outside the small whitewashed pub on the shores of Lake Buttermere. The peaks and slopes across the waters were heathery and soft. Shafts of light lanced down off a crag. Suddenly I experienced a shocking flash. Here — right

here — my soul was at home. Not in Australia. This — for an instant — was where my being found its earth. My English genes and my ancestry seemed to dart before my eyes and confirm my indwelling in this land.

I was forced to reappraise my feelings for places I love: the Grampians; the Blue Mountains; down by the oceans. What hold on my heart did they now possess? Had I ever had an experience quite like this back home? The answer was no. I began to examine my previously sedate sense of 'belonging' in Australia and was forced to admit a measure of distance and unfamiliarity. I could not and cannot deny the illuminating power of that moment which gave flesh to the analysis of Laing. It was an awakening to my own sense of 'newness' and 'strangeness' in this land.

It is my view that as a nation we experience a fundamental ontological insecurity in respect to our land. We confront an 'other' which from the earliest times was experienced as strange and threatening. To use it and abuse

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it has been our path. The land and its ways present themselves as a constant enigma. Our 'busyness' in every aspect of our lives cloaks us from an accommodation with ourselves and our land.

Can we explain our love of clustering in big cities in merely geographical terms? Can we explain our isolation of ourselves in big houses, in the bubble of a car, and now in the dimensionless depths of cyberspace, only in terms of technology? Is there not something deeper at work?

I know that a metaphysically mature set of linked nations was inundated by a civilisation unworthy (so far) of the name. Direct personal contact between *indigene* and *emigré* in this country is rare, and most whites have little or no comprehension of the richness and complexity of Aboriginal religion and ways of life. On this continent we have overlaid a consciousness that was inseparable from its ground of earth, sea and sky. A way of life that required little in the way of material possessions yet is vibrant in its understanding of the psychic and spiritual life of humankind, celebrated through ritual and observance. A life of order and security, yet one lived within the unpredictability of Nature's round.

Australian consciousness lacks a sense of outrage and injustice. (Maybe it would make a difference if we were all taught the facts of those first seventy years.)

Our souls lack the righteous anger of the Old Testament prophets.

Our shores have been too far from the centres of European unrest. Those fierce and terrible writings of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche have failed to move us. (Are we even aware of them?)

European Pessimism (in its hard teaching sense) has failed to find a perch in our hearts. Our psyches lack weight.

Our literary tradition has not encouraged a mature sense of urgency, a sense of outrage or a sense of horror.

I have said we have no tradition of restraint in this country. There is nothing there, in political terms, to which a politician can draw attention, or to whom a citizen, in turn, can appeal to in a politician. I live therefore in a state of perpetual unease, knowing that no cubic metre of land is safe from a hard eye.

I believe that we inheritors and sufferers are required to make that leap into the past, beyond the diaries, letters and official records of the first Europeans, beyond the words of the historians, and into that maelstrom of horror that constitutes the salient signature of the founding and development of Australian society. Yet writers of Australian history have often attempted to assuage our consciences with talk of death through smallpox and venereal disease. It is as if the disappearance of the Australians in this manner is made somehow easier to accept — death by stealth rather than death by introduced disease and hanging, poisoning and bullet.

No work of Australian literature has so far managed to demonstrate the depth of moral and spiritual intent necessary to throw light upon our origins (though Kate Grenville's *The Secret River* repays a careful reading). We have to search elsewhere. Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, in its treatment of colonialism and colonialism's disastrous effects upon the local population, may be of service to us in this respect. The 'devoted band' of invading Europeans, steaming up the wide river of the unnamed African country, know themselves as the 'Eldorado Exploration Expedition'. Although they gild their enterprise with a worthy title, 'their talk ... was the talk of sordid buccaneers. To tear treasure out of the bowels of the land was their desire, with no more moral purpose at the back of it than there is in burglars breaking into a safe'.

The following passage touches a chord with us, in respect to how those early Europeans, both in arriving on our shores, and then fanning out over the country, must at times have felt.

... how can you imagine what a particular region of the first ages a man's untrammelled feet may take him into by the way of solitude — utter solitude without a policeman — by the way of silence ... utter silence ...

(Is not this fear still within us, we confident Australians?)
And again:

I looked around ... [and] I assure you that never, never before, did this land, this river, this jungle, the very arch of this blazing sky, appear to me so hopeless and so dark, so impenetrable to human thought ...

(Well, Western thought ... But who gave a fig for how the savages thought. As if they did!)

Marlow, the narrator, gazes at the land of Africa:

What were we two who had strayed here? Could we handle that dumb thing, or would it handle us? I felt how big, how confoundedly big, was that thing that couldn't talk.

I know nothing in Australian literature to compare with this story. It stays with me like a continuing nightmare; it's like a bog that buries me.

Conversely, Franz Kafka's *The Trial* may be taken as an extended metaphor of the bewilderment experienced by the original tenants of Australia when confronted with an alien presence. The protagonist, Joseph K, is under arrest — for what, he knows not. However, he continues to work and follow the usual routines. Yet he's under arrest.

Who could these men be? What were they talking about? What authority could they represent? K lived in a country with a legal constitution, there was universal peace, all the laws were in force; who dared to seize him in his own dwelling?

K's mental confusion becomes acute, and the question of his arrest all-consuming. The passage of events in this bewildering, farcical, comical, tragical tale is, one might imagine, parallel to the mental experiences of the Australians as they attempted to grapple with these strange beings and their incomprehensible ships (trees sprouting from the sea?).

Then to the facts of their treatment and incarceration.

What is our crime?

What law?

How can I plead a case?

As anthropologists Catherine and Ronald Berndt and Bill Stanner made clear, the Australians were (are) a people for whom order and stability are paramount. Imagine, therefore, the psychic disorientation that came about so swiftly upon the arrival of the big ships. I find it a perverse irony that a culture whose stability is sometimes seen as a weakness ('The reasons for their rapid disorganisation and relatively easy collapse are to be found not only in the nature of contact itself ... reasons are to be sought, as well, in the structure and organisation of Aboriginal social life and belief, with its heavy emphasis on non-change, on the emotional satisfaction to be gained through extreme dependence on the great mythical beings through the concept of Eternal Dreaming' — the Berndts' *World of the First Australians*) could itself show the lead to a society destroying itself by its reckless rate of change and contemptuous disregard for the ecology of the land.

From the late 18th century to the present, the primordial soils and landforms of terra australis were to be overlaid by minds informed by Euclidean space, Newtonian mechanics, Aristotelian logic, African slavery, monotheistic religion, English law, and the instantaneity of electricity. A world would be measured and split by clocks and calendars. The ruthlessness and power of an oil, coal and

gas-powered economy. A geologist's eye, an engineer's brain.

Other knowledges and different ways of seeing and feeling are available to us. Yet our public discourses are constrained by those forces of Europeanism that I have tried to identify in this essay. Fearfully constrained. And why is this so? Why this culture of fear?

I have no answer.

The will to force the earth to deliver up its riches and its products in obeisance to an ideology is not a uniquely Australian will. Yet that will is as demanding here as anywhere on earth.

It continues to astonish me, as I take a long gaze at the history of Western philosophy and religion, how the very basis of our physical lives — the air we breathe, the land upon which we walk, the waters and the seas — are treated merely as 'given'; a backdrop — in fact not even that. These things are accorded no status whatsoever. The

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nature of Man alone forms an unwavering focus. This becomes clear only when contrasted with Aboriginal knowledges in which country is gendered, in which landforms are embowered in metaphysical meaning, in which parts of one's body correspond to relationships of kin, and in which grammars vary according to whom one is speaking.

To learn to think systemically and to consider all beings, all species, all living and non-living forms, in our thinking and doing, is to both enlarge and dignify our selves and to confer respect upon country.

I have attempted in this essay to draw attention to the brevity of the European occupation, of the need to pay homage to the richness and profound knowledge of Aboriginal cultures and of the healing need to acknowledge our personal and collective shame.

I have come to recognise the tragedy that is my country's past.

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*Rolf de Heer, when making the film *Ten Canoes*, remarked that English is a language of division and category. Aboriginal languages are those of inclusiveness and inter-connectedness.