

RECONCILIATION, TRAUMA AND THE NATIVE BORN

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How should non-Indigenous Australians reconcile with Indigenous people? The Aboriginal Reconciliation Council urges newcomers to view the land through the eyes of the Indigenous owners.¹ Keith Windschuttle insists that the narrative of frontier violence has been greatly exaggerated.² Mainstream country musicians reconcile their place in Australia by a kind of belonging-in-parallel justified by hard rural work³ while Indigenous musicians more commonly celebrate what can be celebrated, and set aside the rest.⁴

Do we need a knowledge of inter-racial history for genuine reconciliation? I heard a young Aboriginal ranger at Kakadu explain to his audience the work of the National Park without reference to, and possibly even in ignorance of, the murderous violence which had occurred in the area within the lifetime of his grandparents.⁵ By contrast the Indian-born Australian Manik Datar believes that historians must never cease their efforts to reveal and interpret the past:

Don't cover it up. We haven't finished with history, it's not a report-collecting exercise. We can't say 'Let's stop, we have enough for the datum now'.⁶

In navigating routes towards reconciliation, I am drawn to Datar's position. Yet consider the criticism that we historians have had a negative effect on young people's self-perception, in portraying our inter-racial history as dismal, or worse. I am mindful of

the calls to present the 'other side' of the story, that is, I presume, Aboriginal history in terms additional to invasion, massacre, exclusion, discrimination and child removal. It is not clear, though, what might be an educational converse to Aboriginal accounts of the Coniston massacre.⁷ The viewpoint of the white-washing Inquiry of 1929? A contemporary account of peaceful coexistence drawn from another part of the Territory? A story of a pastoralist who saved Aborigines from persecution? Possibly all of them.

It was with such thoughts in mind that I accepted an invitation, in October 2001, to present a three-hour workshop on reconciliation to the annual conference of Adult Learning Australia.⁸ The setting was the Gagudju Crocodile hotel at Jabiru set on the edge of the Arnhem Land reserve and the Kakadu National Park.

My plan was to use local Aboriginal accounts of Top End history to present an understanding that Australians cannot achieve true reconciliation until they acknowledge the past, nor acknowledge the past until they know actually what happened. Nor, like Manik Datar, can we ever be satisfied that we know enough. Having established these principles in the first hour of the workshop, I would then present some kind of 'other side', and lastly attempt a resolution. Anticipating the difficulty of returning participants who might well be tearful, shocked, silenced or angry, to a point where we could attempt a constructive resolution, I videoed the Kakadu sunrise on

the morning of the workshop to project during the final half hour. I bought a water-melon whose seeds and fruit I planned to distribute at the conclusion.

Early in the conference I met the four adult educators, including an Aboriginal friend, who had volunteered to act in the performances. Serious debate between us began immediately. Was it appropriate that we should be as confrontational as I had planned? The Vice President of Adult Learning Australia affirmed that 'Reconciliation' had been added to the aims of the Association the previous year: but what of the immediate protocols? We agreed that it was necessary not only to consult the local community representatives for permission to enact the stories, but also Aboriginal educators from other parts of Australia. Everyone who was consulted agreed that the exercise was not only necessary but would be beneficial.⁹ The workshop was set for the last session of the conference.

The team began with a graphic representation of the extraordinary story collected by the anthropologist R.M. Berndt in 1952 on the Daly River:

The allocation of food by Jesus.

Jesus grew to a big man. He had a large garden, in which grew many vegetables and fruits; he watched the apples ripening. He had twelve men (Apostles) to help him.

He got his twelve workers to make a long table. When it was done, he set in the middle a plate on which rested one apple, and all those present (the twelve Apostles) ate of it until they were full. Then he, Jesus, replaced the apple — they had not finished.

Then Christ spoke: 'I gave you one kind of food, the apple. Later I will give you another food'.

So they returned to their garden. Later they grew wheat, and made flour. Then Jesus made a big damper. When it was ready, they all sat down at the long table

and ate of this damper until they were full. But they did not finish: Jesus put it away, as he had done with the apple.

And the Father talked to Jesus: 'All of this is for the white men — they will have iron, houses and everything'. Thus the Baijang [God] put motor cars, aeroplanes, houses, horses and so on for all the white people: he also made rifles, guns, pannikins and knives; and Baijang spoke to Christ, 'That is the Dreaming for all of you lot'.

Jesus Christ was on the side of the white people — he gave all that food to them. Adam had only native food, for Adam and Riva were Aborigines. They had nothing when they left the garden owned by God.

Chinamen grew rice and made grass houses: white men saw these, and the Chinamen saw the iron houses: the white men saw the rice, and the Chinamen saw the flour: each bought from the other. Only the Aborigines had nothing.¹⁰

One of the actors read the story aloud, pausing while the others carried the items of the White Dreaming — including the water-melon — to the table. The very asymmetrical last supper remained in place on its table for the rest of the morning.

At the end of the scenario I warned the participants that a very painful performance would now follow. Nobody left the room.

A MASSACRE AT MIRKI

These diabolical events, told by a Milingimbi man in the 1970s, took place about 200 kilometres east of Jabiru, and eighty kilometres south-west of Milingimbi.¹¹ Here in 1885 White pastoralists occupied a run they called Florida Station. The narrator describes how the Whites met two Aboriginal women and learned the whereabouts of the camp. A man they saw and chased down confessed to cattle killing, and was murdered. At night the Whites attacked and shot the

adults who were hiding in the trees surrounding the camp. On the following day the boss returned to kill the surviving children. There are five speaking roles in the story, including the narrator's. In traditional story-telling style, the narration is carried mainly through dialogue, and is set in the several locations.

I asked the conference participants to remain facing the front looking at a slide of the Arnhem Land escarpment, while the actors performed out of sight at the back of the room. As the action shifted between Murwangi the pastoral station, the open bush, and the camp at Mirki, the actors moved about, until, for the final killing of the children, all the voices were grouped in the left back corner of the room.

These are some extracts from the story. The narrator begins:

More people came on horses
'Hey! Let's go and have a look on the plains over there. We'll go and see if we can find some of the Aboriginal people cooking on the plains over there.'
And they went, with ten horses. They went, and they came right out on the plains at Dharmala, and they went round the edges, and right into the middle. They kept going, then: two women.
'Look! There! There! There! Someone's coming!'
The women were coming from getting shellfish and crabs. They rode up to them and quickly met them...

The killing of the adults:

So they [the pastoralists] went back to Murwangi. They arrived.
'We've killed one Aboriginal, he's lying out there somewhere.'
'Serves him right', said the boss to them, 'Serves him right. Where are they all?'
'Well', he said, 'they were in the jungle. We're just off there now'.
Up they got, galloped away, and it was night. Through the night they galloped

and arrived at Mirki, spreading out to surround the place. Surrounding, meeting around the other side.

In the jungle at Mirki, and there they heard something: they heard the people playing the *djunggiriny* ceremony.

Didgeridoo, clapsticks, dancing, in the jungle.

'They're dancing right here!'

Like that.

'They must have come into the jungle.

Good', they said.

'Hey, we'd better watch out for ourselves: some of those bad White people might come from Murwangi', the Aboriginal people said to themselves, 'but we will look after each other, won't we?'

'Yes. We'll keep a look out, because it's dark now. We'll go out and have a look though the jungle.' Like that.

But when they went, they saw the horses, surrounding them completely.

Only the horses, the White men had got off their horses and were standing up.

The Aboriginals stood there and looked at the Europeans. The Europeans could not see them.

One of them said...

'We saw all those horses. What are we going to do? How are we going to escape?'...

After anxious Aboriginal exchanges about what to do next, the story refocuses on the Whites:

The White men arrived, and went into the thick jungle area. They entered and stood there.

'This is their place. Where did they go?'...

'Here they are. They've all climbed up into these trees'.

'We'll shoot at them. Straight up into the trees...'

One stood here, one stood there, one stood there. Think about the noise that those guns made, shooting up into the trees.

Shooting, shooting, shooting up into the trees.
They all fell down onto the ground, and just lay there all over the ground, every one of them, they were all dead...

The last part of the story tells of the killing of the children after the boss returns the next day:

You see he had a repeater rifle, one which fires a lot of bullets. That's what he had, that White man.
'You watch me carefully! Just watch me. Don't look anywhere, keep your eyes on me.'
And he pulled the trigger, I think.
And they all just went falling down onto the ground. Every one of them, just lying there, and not only a few, lots of them.
Children, just like we have here at school, girls and boys. All those children, just like our ones here at Milingimbi.

The effect of the performance on actors and listeners was one of more or less acute distress, not least because the story is emotionally unresolved. The narrator ends at this last sentence.

Of course, Arnhem Land culture continues to flourish. The room still darkened and the audience sombre, I showed a series of images of visitor signage in Kakadu such as the creation-story of Namanjolg's Feather.¹² The series ended with a shot of Aboriginal children playing and swimming in the Katherine river. Throughout the sequence I played a recording of Kev Carmody's *From Little Things Big Things Grow*:

Gather round people I'll tell you a story,
I'll tell you a story of power and pride
Opposite people on opposite sides...
Vincent Lingiari was little, dirt was his floor...
This is the story of something much more:
That power and privilege cannot move a

people
[Who] know where they stand and they stand in their lore.¹³

Now followed the painful account, illustrated with pictures of Aboriginal institutions, of the removal of children from the former Oenpelli Christian mission in the 1940s:

At last, in the morning, that 'white' man went to look for them, and got them. He kept on doing that. Some he couldn't find, of those young girls and boys; but some, he took their arms. Then they were frightened: they cried loudly when he touched their skin, those children. That child had no sense, because they hadn't explained to him properly; so he just got frightened of the 'white' man when he came up there talking. He tried to cry, and urinated in fear when the 'white' man touched his skin. He tried to run away. He tried to run away but those Aborigines standing near took hold of his arm. He tried to bite them, but at last they got a lot of those children; they brought them up and the 'white' man got them. The child tried to bite the hand; then they said to him, 'You stay quiet with that 'white' man, or he might shoot you with his gun!' Then the child stopped crying altogether.¹⁴

It seemed, as I suppose I had intended, that there was to be no release from persecution. I followed the story, with an exchange drawn from the 1976 Ranger Uranium Enquiry before Mr Justice Fox. Here the lawyer W. Gray was cross-examining a Mr O'Connor, who evidently at this point was representing the view of an entrepreneurial Oenpelli company called FAMCO. O'Connor, clearly inexperienced in court procedures, was trying to argue that if in fact uranium mining was to take place, the Indigenous community should have a stake in the venture. The lawyer Gray, in a manner which will be disagreeably familiar to all

those who have been cross examined in land claim proceedings, seized upon an unfortunate but irrelevant weakness of the witness to discredit his area of expertise. Playing the lawyer, I made myself as obnoxious as possible. This is an extract from our presentation:

O'Connor: Yes, there are a number of people at Maningrida that are affiliated, the...

Gray: What language do they speak?

O'Connor: The Rembarunga group. I'm not certain — actually certain of their —

Gray: The Rembarunga group.

O'Connor: Rembarunga group.

Gray: What is their country?

O'Connor: I think it's near Mount Brockman, in that area.

Gray: Near Mount Brockman?

O'Connor: Yes.

Gray: Are you certain of that?

O'Connor: No I'm not, I can just say it's hearsay. I'm not absolutely certain of that —

Gray: And I take it that you haven't really studied the area either?

O'Connor: Not of Mount Brockman, no.

Gray: Not in terms of Aboriginal affiliation?

O'Connor: No, not in that way.

Gray: No. This particular document which was handed to you by Sam Wagbarra, but you don't know where it comes from and you didn't ask him, refers to Mount Borradaile. Does this particular area fall within the area which is currently being looked at by FAMCO?...

Later Gray very neatly side-stepped O'Connor's strongly stated position that, should mining actually occur, the FAMCO directors would want to be involved.

Gray: Well what's the general thrust of your argument in favour of mining of uranium in general?

O'Connor: In general I think that — personally I think that if this Commission

or any Commission says there's no more mining tomorrow that would be the end of it. If the Commission says or anybody says there's going to be mining, with our people, by their intention of being in it, well they should have a foot in it and some right to have equity in it.

Gray: But that isn't getting down to whether or not there are dangers associated with uranium mining or not, is it? What's your particular belief there?¹⁵

Two hours into the workshop, and despite the interpolation of the optimism of Kev Carmody, the atmosphere was, I thought, dejected and depressed.

What should follow? If educators should present 'alternative views', with what should we juxtapose these verbatim representations of northern Aboriginal history. A story — if one existed — in which Aboriginal people escaped from the pastoralists would demean those who died at Mirki. A story — if one existed — of Aborigines killing Whites in the area would compound violence with violence and possibly sicken us still further.

This is the nub. In a fundamental sense there isn't much of a good side of Aboriginal history to present. My experience of listening, reading and thinking about Aboriginal history for the whole of my professional life reinforces the view that the life of most Aborigines living with Whites has varied between unpleasant to unbearable. Australia has a very bad record indeed of clandestine and administrative violence. To present a pastoralist's or official's view of this history to me would do no more than belittle the agonising Indigenous experience. Of course on the frontier there were kind missionaries and responsible officials. Indeed, a principal reason for altering Northern Territory child welfare policy at the same time as the Oenpelli children, who were removed from the Christian mission, was the welfare officer who wrote to his superior to inform him that he could no longer carry out such painful and destructive practices.¹⁶ That uplifting story is

worth repeating, but it should not be allowed to distract us from the fact that many hundreds of Northern Territory children were removed by officials and suffered painfully for many years as a consequence.

This doesn't mean that there is no 'other side' to present. In seeking what to do next in the workshop I was influenced by the views of the Cuban-born Australian Marivic Wyndham, who explained in *Belonging*:

[Aboriginal people] are our elders. But that doesn't mean... that I'm prepared to say 'I'm very sorry for what's happened to you, now how much land do you want back?' Bloodshed, literal or figurative, holds a power of redemption. Soft love of the land will hand it back. Hard love says, we both love this place to death, that's where warriors ought to meet. ... You say to Aboriginals, 'You have a better political case than I do, but I'm not giving it up, because if I don't love it as much as you do, then I should just give it to you'.¹⁷

Before they rush to apologise for the course of Australian history, therefore, I believe that non-Aborigines should think hard about what the Australian land, society and nation means to them. This is not to deny that sometimes Aboriginal people won battles against pastoralists (which of course they did); more importantly, educators should reflect that Australia now is the physical — and emotional — home of many other peoples besides the Indigenous peoples — *whatever happened in the past*. Reconciliation at once becomes much more complex, much more painful, much more traumatic. This is as it should be.

In support of this general position I now presented a series of pictures of Australia, rural and urban, northern and southern, coastal lakes and desert mines, hot and cold, sandstone and granite, dwellings, open space, parks, harbours, lakes, paddocks, old, modern, homesteads, streets, to some of which I hoped everyone would identify. Simultaneously I

played Neil Murray's song from his recent album *Native Born*.

Murray, former guitarist in the Aboriginal band Warumpi, is a white musician who has spent most of his life amongst Aboriginal peoples. He knows the history, he has been to the massacre sites, he knows Aboriginal pain intimately. Yet he sings in *Native Born*:

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,
I would not strip you of your forests
Or pollute your clear blue skies
I would not desecrate your sacred lands
I would not plunder on your shores
I would not foul your precious waters
For I am your native born.¹⁸

I am always greatly affected by this brave and emotional song. In the shocked silence which followed, I seized the hand of a woman weeping at the front row and for long moments we sat in tears together.

But at this point the workshop faltered. Maybe I should have thrown the initiative back to the participants. Perhaps I should have suggested that the company return to the groups in which they had met during the week to plan a creative response to the morning's traumatic display. Probably I should have pre-arranged a more formal Aboriginal response.

What I actually did, with the actors helping to write the suggestions on butchers' paper above the table of the 'last supper', was to brainstorm suggestions as to how to rearrange the 'last supper' table more equitably. Obviously aeroplanes could be moved about so that all Australians could share them, but not everyone agreed that cars were an unmitigated benefit. Much of the imagined Aboriginal contribution unperceived by the Daly River missionaries (for example, consensual decision making) could not be

physically represented, nor could we assume that Aborigines would want to share their own culture with other Australians at all. We persevered for some minutes, but the change of mood was too abrupt, the exercise a little perfunctory. The video couldn't be seen very well on the small monitor, there was not much enthusiasm for the watermelon seeds. I did not manage the emotional closure in the way I had intended.

My mistake, I think, was that I had delved too deeply into our collective and individual psyches for a mere rearrangement of the table to be an intellectually or emotionally satisfying closure. In truth I had underestimated the profound effect of juxtaposing these two aspects of reconciliation — the agonising history and the implications of *Native Born* — both on the audience and on myself. But wait: genuine reconciliation surely has to be a bit painful.

Maybe I didn't have the confidence to invite the participants to reflect for several minutes before handing out the melon in silence, pondering the implications of the videoed sun rising over our heads that very morning and speaking about our feelings. That would, in retrospect, have been preferable.

Endnotes

- 1 Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation, *Sharing History*, Key Issue Paper, (Canberra: AGPS, 1994), p. 9.
- 2 For example, K. Windschuttle, "The Fabrication of Australian History", in *The New Criterion* <www.newcriterion.com/archive/20/sept01/keith.htm>.
- 3 See the discussion in P. Read, *Belonging*, (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 118-120.
- 4 In his most recent album, *They Don't Make 'Em Like That Any More*, (Sony 2000) the Koori vocalist Troy Cassar-Daley celebrates the careers of ten Australians, including Don Bradman, Mum Shirl, Albert Namatjira and Betty Cuthbert — without reference to their racial heritage.
- 5 Personal visit, October 2001.
- 6 Quoted in Read, *Belonging*, p. 207.
- 7 A series of organised killings of Aboriginal people in Central Australia in 1928, following the murder of one White man and an attack upon another.
- 8 "Place and the Ecology of Learning", Jabiru, September 2001.
- 9 A member of the volunteer team teaching at Milingimbi, who personally knew many of the local community members, discussed the proposal with them.
- 10 R.M. Berndt, "Surviving Influences of Mission Contact on the Daly River, Northern Territory of Australia", reproduced in P. Read, *A Social History of the Northern Territory*, p. 8; *The Mission Stations*, (Canberra: AGPS, 1979), p. 28
- 11 Transcribed from Gupapuyngu by Gularranga in 1976, edited by Matjarra, translated by Michael Christie, and reproduced with permission in P. and J. Read (eds), *Long Time Olden Time: Aboriginal Accounts of Northern Territory History*, CD ROM (Firmware, 1992), story read on disc by Rhoda Roberts.
- 12 A traditional story associated with a rock formation which presents its account not as 'Aborigines believe that...' but 'This is what happened'.
- 13 Kev Carmody, *From Little Things Big Things Grow*, (Larrikin Music Publishing Pty Ltd.).
- 14 C.H. and R.M. Berndt, 'An Oenpelli Monologue', reproduced in Read, *A Social History of the Northern Territory*, pp. 9.
15. Transcript of Proceedings from 9 September 1975 to 22 March 1977. Commissioner Mr Justice Fox, Ranger Uranium Environmental Enquiry, (microfilm; June 1976), pp. 10054-5.
- 16 Patrol Officer Evans, 23 December 1949, Commonwealth Archives of Australia.
- 17 Read, *Belonging*, p.146.
- 18 Neil Murray, *Native Born*, from *Dust*, (recording: ABC Music, 1996).