

# ‘The Truth that will Set us all Free’: An Uncertain History of Memorials to Indigenous Australians

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Aborigines and other Australians have not met with amity. Memorials to the Aboriginal people of Australia are not common and some of the more prominent are regularly damaged. Eddies of past tempests slap disturbingly at modern day memorials thousands of kilometres and several generations removed from the eye of furious storms. What follows is a difficult story of what seems at first sight to be blind racism, at a second sight, a rampant colonialism and at a more reflective third, perhaps, the economy of the pastoralist and the farmer in deadly disharmony to that of the hunter gatherer. Whatever the origins, the consequences of conflict endure for centuries.<sup>1</sup>

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### THREE SHRINES DESTROYED

In 1865 a monument was erected on the Fremantle Esplanade, near Perth, to three members of an exploring expedition. They were, as the plaque explains, 'attacked at night by treacherous natives' while sleeping:

THEY WERE MURDERED AT BOOLA BOOLA  
NEAR LA GRANGE BAY ON THE 13 NOVEMBER 1864.  
ALSO AN APPRECIATIVE TOKEN OF  
REMEMBRANCE  
OF  
MAITLAND BROWN  
ONE OF THE PIONEER PASTORALISTS AND PREMIER  
POLITICIANS OF THIS STATE. INTREPID LEADER OF THE  
GOVERNMENT SEARCH AND PUNITIVE PARTY.<sup>2</sup>

Here 'punitive party' should be taken to mean the intention of revenge and indiscriminate killing of Aboriginal people.

In 1994 a counter-statement was attached to the fourth and empty side of the memorial reading:

THIS PLAQUE WAS ERECTED BY PEOPLE WHO FOUND  
THE MONUMENT BEFORE YOU OFFENSIVE.  
THE MONUMENT DESCRIBES THE EVENTS AT LA GRANGE FROM  
ONE PERSPECTIVE ONLY; THE VIEWPOINT OF THE WHITE 'SETTLERS'.  
NO MENTION IS MADE OF THE  
RIGHT OF ABORIGINAL PEOPLE TO DEFEND THEIR LAND  
OR OF THE HISTORY OF PROVOCATION  
WHICH LED TO THE EXPLORERS' DEATHS.  
THE 'PUNITIVE PARTY' MENTIONED HERE ENDED IN  
THE DEATHS OF SOMEWHERE AROUND TWENTY ABORIGINAL PEOPLE.  
THE WHITES WERE WELL-ARMED AND EQUIPPED  
AND NONE OF THEIR PARTY WAS KILLED OR WOUNDED.  
THIS PLAQUE IS IN MEMORY OF THE ABORIGINAL PEOPLE  
KILLED AT LA GRANGE. IT ALSO COMMEMORATES ALL OTHER  
ABORIGINAL PEOPLE WHO DIED DURING THE INVASION  
OF THEIR COUNTRY.  
LEST WE FORGET<sup>3</sup>

This monument, too, has been attacked with crowbars and sledge hammers several times. And several times it has been repaired.

In 1884 the Kalkadoon people of central Queensland fought a pitched and final battle against a combined force of settlers and native police. A century later a monument was erected close to the site reading:

The spirit of the Kalkatungu tribe never died at battle; but remains intact and alive today within the Kalkadoon tribal council.<sup>4</sup>

This Kalkadoon monument has been dynamited several times in the last twenty years.<sup>5</sup> Clearly the spirit of the Kalkadoon people indeed survives intact: what invading society would bother to destroy the monument to a people who had vanished a century ago or who today lived in quiet compliance to its oppressor.

Worst of all was the desecration done to the grave of Eddie Mabo. A Torres Strait Islander, Mabo initiated the famous land claim on Murray Island leading to the High Court's declaration of the continuing existence of Native Title. He was buried in Townsville, on the mainland, where he had spent much of his life. On the third anniversary of the High Court's decision, his grave was desecrated with eight red swastikas and the word ABO spray-painted across the granite tombstone. The tomb was removed and re-erected on Mabo's birthplace, Murray Island.<sup>6</sup>

#### **MASSACRE SITES**

La Grange and the Kalkadoon notwithstanding, certain monuments to massacres of Aboriginal people have sometimes remained unmolested. A notorious killing was the Coniston Massacre of 1928 in Central Australia, in which a white man, Fred Brooks, was murdered and another pastoralist attacked. In the series of punitive revenge expeditions perhaps some 70 Warlpiri Aborigines were killed. In 2003 a memorial was unveiled reading:

IN 1928 NEAR THIS PLACE  
THE MURDER OF FREDERICK BROOKS  
LED TO THE KILLING OF MANY INNOCENT ABORIGINAL PEOPLE  
ACROSS THE REGION  
WE WILL REMEMBER THEM ALWAYS.<sup>7</sup>

Why has this monument so far survived undamaged? Why is it located at the site of Brooks' murder rather than one of the many places where the killings of Aboriginal people took place? One reason is that the lessees of Mt Dennison pastoral station, where the waterhole is situated, agreed to its erection there. Such co-operation with pastoralists is by no means to be assumed. The monument's location points to the obvious but crucial fact that every Australian site has either an owner or a representative of local, shire, city or municipal council, or national, state or marine park which was consulted for permission. Permission once granted may be physically contested by others unless the monument is located off the tourist or local tracks. Such is the case at Coniston. Indeed, that may well be the primary reason for its intact survival to date.

Another factor is that the events of the 1920s are receding even amongst the victims. Only three witnesses to the massacre are still living. The precise locations of Aboriginal killings must necessarily be of less moment to younger Aborigines more concerned with who and why. People under sixty years of age know the events only at second hand, different from thirty years ago when the author visited many of the sites connected with the Coniston story. The survivors three decades ago naturally doubted neither the exact locations nor the precise sequence of events of these traumatic events. One such was a waterhole or soak named Tipinpa. With several guides I visited the site where my guide Jampajimpa recounted the story. We should imagine him gesturing for emphasis as he recalled the different location of water, horses, sun and people:

Water here.  
But they all sleepin' round here, all the old people was  
sleepin' here, and some people was sleepin' here,  
And water there.  
They was getting water that way,  
And this way  
Well they [the punitive party] come round with the horses  
this way  
And this way.<sup>8</sup>

Why, we may ask, was the memorial not erected here? The pastoralists may not have wanted it at Tipinpa. Perhaps most participants in the planning preferred it to be located at a more

‘neutral’ site like Brooks’ Soak. The events are passing out of Aboriginal living memory. So the Coniston memorial, much less raw than Mabo’s, may remain undamaged – by either party. Perhaps memorials to killings even further in the past than eighty years ago may be allowed a yet bolder confrontation with contemporary Australians.<sup>9</sup>

Such is the case at the Myall Creek Massacre Memorial in central New South Wales. In 1838, twenty-eight Aboriginal men, women and children were killed by a party of white men at Bingara, near Moree. The massacre was one of the very few killings of Aboriginal people in which the perpetrators were brought to justice. Perhaps for that reason it is one of the best-known events of the violently contested frontier. Here co-operation between victim and oppressor, or more to the point, between the rather remote descendants of victim and oppressor, created in 2000 a very powerful memorial at the site of the massacre. Hundreds of people, many of whom were descendants of one side or the other – or both – walked together to the unveiling.

Heather Goodall, the historian of Aboriginal New South Wales, writes:

This locally initiated project, planned over many months by Indigenous and non-Indigenous residents, brought together descendants of the clan from which twenty-eight Wirrayaraay people who died in 1838 and descendants of the perpetrators of the massacre. They stood side-by-side at the ceremony held in June 2000 to dedicate the memorial, without accusation or challenge, but with each group sharing a common sense of both the sadness of the site and the value of communication the two groups had struck up.<sup>10</sup>

The memorial stands on a hill on public recreation ground overlooking Myall Creek as it winds peacefully across a private property. The walkway to the main memorial consists of seven small granite boulders, each of which bear a plaque with an engraved image and bilingual text in Gamilaraay and English. The plaques are simple and uncompromising, each representing an episode of the Wirrayaraay story. The walkway leads just over the crest of the hill, to the main memorial which stands on the edge of the sharp drop into the valley. The single, massive granite boulder carries one brief inscription:

IN MEMORY OF THE WIRRAYARAAY PEOPLE WHO WERE MURDERED ON THE SLOPES OF THIS RIDGE IN AN UNPROVOKED BUT PREMEDITATED ACT IN THE LATE AFTERNOON OF 10 JUNE, 1838.

ERECTED ON 10 JUNE 2000 BY A GROUP OF ABORIGINAL AND NON-ABORIGINAL AUSTRALIANS IN AN ACT OF RECONCILIATION AND IN ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF THE TRUTH OF OUR SHARED HISTORY.

WE REMEMBER THEM. NGIYANI WINANGAY GANUNGA

Goodall was present on the day of the memorial's unveiling. She writes that the most moving moment

was the slow walk from the little hall up the long hill to the actual reserve where the walkway and final monument are placed. The walk was very solemn but also relaxed and communicative too, with a chance to talk to people as we all walked up. And then the site itself, the size of the massive boulder and the view across this idyllic, sunlit, now totally peaceful scene was very very moving. The final boulder so much more expressive because of its open meanings, than the small very representational graphics along the walkway. And the laying of small stones and rocks: just wonderful. The presence of the perpetrators' descendants as well as the victims' descendants was important, and made the ironies of the 'peaceful' scene even more edgy and almost painful. Unresolved tensions all around. Strongly emotional, but it was also very restrained, unpretentious and modest. There was a feeling of doing something new not just memorialising a past tragedy or repeating the rhetoric of victimisation. A man whose ancestor escaped hanging but who later went mad spoke very simply but powerfully about the corroding burden of guilt and disturbance the events had left.<sup>11</sup>

The memorial's importance is its quality of evoking a response beyond the word spoken or engraved. The towering boulder conveys a powerful presence in its size and mass. Like the Washington memorial to the Vietnam war, Myall Creek invites visitors to contribute their own stories and meanings. For the final element of the site is a shallow trench, encircling the central boulder on a two-metre radius, around whose centre the participants had been asked to

lay a stone. Some offerings had tiny messages in pen recording the community and country from which they came. Others were unmarked. Together, they attested to acts of violence in other places; simultaneously also the stones were revitalising gifts recording the community and country (the part of Australia) whence the visitors came. Seven years after the unveiling, the memorial to this local event has become a reference point to other Australian sites whose representatives today often bring a stone from our own country. Each is a tiny act of purification of an infamous site.

### **MEMORIALS TO RESERVATIONS**

As the violent frontier receded, a different era of violence was visited upon the Aborigines, who by 1880s were forced in large numbers to gather on reserves for accommodation, education and work. Australia once held many hundreds of Aboriginal reserves, government stations and church missions. Commonly, by 1900, governments wanting the Aborigines out of town would build a station, install a manager to keep order and force the Aborigines to reside there. When, generally after the Second World War, stations became too expensive or hard to control, and policy changed from forced isolation to forced integration, the Aboriginal residents were often ejected from their reserve homes as violently as their forebears had been forced on to them – sometimes only a generation before. Twenty five years ago older Aboriginal people liked nothing better than to re-visit the abandoned or resumed reserves where they or their parents had been raised. Reserves held memories of their personal and family life; they were intimately linked to a collective Indigenous identity. An empty paddock with irises and one or two plum trees growing round the patch of grass greener than the rest, an iron bed frame and one or two obscure tombstones became the focus for many a nostalgic pilgrimage. Yet today, very few of the former reserves contain any signage to commemorate their former existence. Nor are the reasons for their absence entirely to be explained by the racism of the colonist. We add a new factor: the historical significance of reserves is undecided.

Four hundred kilometres south west of Sydney is the site of Warangesda, a large reserve of the Wiradjuri people. Created in 1883, Warangesda was forcibly closed in 1924. For decades the site lay empty, a sheep walk dotted with ruined buildings, the dormitory fallen in, the chapel stuffed with hay bales, the people and their

descendants scattered over half of New South Wales. Survivors revisiting Warangesda sighed nostalgically over happier times. The Wiradjuri artist Roy Kennedy, born too young to live on Warangesda and who grew up in the 1930s and 1940s, depicts the stability and harmony of many Wiradjuri families living together.<sup>12</sup> In fact, Warangesda was miserable. The written records of managers and administrators suggest it to have been an unhappy place of walk-off, strike, confrontation with management, food shortages, cultural and linguistic loss and much internal dispute between people crammed side by side with their traditional enemies in an artificial European-style village.

How should the site be interpreted, given the lack of consensus as to whether Warangesda was a place of happiness, coercion, security, education, confrontation or a developing shared identity? A recent history, written by an Aboriginal author and a non-Aboriginal author, conclude:

The Warangesda Mission Station site which... should have been preserved not only for its Aboriginal historical value but for its overall Australian historical value, is a disgrace.

Its present condition is testament to the lack of historical interest shown by the Lands Department, the National Parks and Wildlife Service and the leaseholders but primarily to the rejection of a Land Claim, submitted by the Wiradjuri people a number of years ago. With minimal financial assistance the Wiradjuri would have maintained and preserved Warangesda for its historical and religious value.<sup>13</sup>

Significantly, the nearby non-Aboriginal hamlet of Darlington Point, desperately short of anything of tourist interest, has not chosen to erect any signage outside the old reserve. Yet simultaneously its tourist website is unexpectedly critical of the Aboriginal administration:

The Warangesda Aboriginal Mission was established 4 km from town in 1880 by pastor John Gribble who was appalled at the living conditions of the Aboriginal peoples and the indifference of local whites. Gribble set up the mission to try and help them. However, the government later decided it wished to discourage concentrations of Aborigines. After Gribble's departure it made



life impossible for the residents by throwing them off the land, forcibly removing children to white homes, resuming land and terminating financial assistance. The mission bell now adorns St Paul's Anglican Church in town.<sup>14</sup>

Both the Wiradjuri and their non-Aboriginal counterparts seem to share the same ambiguity. Is Warangesda a site to be celebrated or mourned, elevated or forgotten? Uncertainty about the meaning of the site today, I suspect, contributes to its continuing absence of recognition.

### **MEMORIALS TO THE STOLEN GENERATIONS**

Many thousands of Aboriginal children to about 1970 were removed from their families and institutionalised, fostered or adopted. As adults, and influenced by bodies like the Link Up organisations, they began to reassess their experiences first as personal experience, then as shared memory, lastly as national history.<sup>15</sup>

The buildings of the Retta Dixon Home in Darwin, destroyed by Cyclone Tracy in 1975, were the institutional home of hundreds of Northern Territory Aboriginal girls. Lorna Cubillo, who famously but unsuccessfully sued the Commonwealth government for wrongful removal and ill-treatment, was incarcerated in Retta Dixon for most of her teenage years.<sup>16</sup> Today, a stone plinth in Karu Park, Darwin, where the institution once stood, has two plaques attached to it. The first, rather unexpectedly to modern eyes, commemorates the work of the two missionaries Retta Dixon and Amelia Shankleton. Compared to the mission work of the two women, the Home seemed to the inscriber to be only of secondary importance. The plaque reads, in part:

IN MEMORY OF RETTA DIXON WHO IN 1906 ESTABLISHED THE  
ABORIGINAL INLAND MISSION IN NSW  
AND OF THE CHILDREN WHO LIVED ON THIS SITE IN THE BUILDING  
NAMED AFTER HER 1961-1980.  
THE HOME WAS DEVASTATED BY CYCLONE TRACY IN 1974 AND  
CLOSED IN 1982.

The plaque underneath, added ten years after the first, was evidently inscribed by the former inmates of the Home:

THIS PLAQUE IS IN RECOGNITION OF ABORIGINAL CHILDREN DISPLACED  
FROM MOTHER AND COUNTRY  
KARU PARK ACCOMMODATED IN A CHILDREN'S INSTITUTION NAMED  
RETTA DIXON HOME.

SIMILAR INSTITUTIONS WERE ESTABLISHED AT KAHLIN, GARDEN POINT,  
CROKER ISLAND AND GROOTE EYLANDT.

THIS PLAQUE IS DEDICATED TO THE MEMORY OF THOSE CHILDREN AND  
THEIR MISSION WORKERS.

What had happened? Public opinion had significantly changed. The crucial decade of public reassessment of the history of separated children, 1986-1996, included the Report by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission into removal, *Bringing Them Home*.<sup>17</sup> Non-Aboriginal sympathisers, appalled at the graphic histories narrated in the Report, later in newspapers and television, asked what they could do to help. The descriptive phrase 'The Stolen Generations' gained popularity.

Another important consequence of the publicity following *Bringing Them Home* was to allow the Stolen Generations – the victims of the policy – the opportunity to reassess what they had been always assured had been for their own good. The differences between the wording of the plaques demonstrates how the Retta Dixon girls began to separate themselves emotionally and psychologically from their former carers. Inscribing their own plaque allowed them to find their own collective voice in contrast to the missionaries.

Much greater psychological separations were to follow. One of the most powerful of Stolen Generations memorials is that to the former inmates of the Colebrook Aboriginal Girls' Home in Adelaide. Many of the hundreds of removed South Australian children were placed here under the care of the Presbyterian Church. Today there is nothing left of the buildings and grounds. All that remains is an empty space of three or four hectares.

In 1998, post *Bringing Them Home*, the Colebrook girls constructed a spacious walk-through memorial garden on the site of their lost institution. Encouraged by a local Reconciliation Group, the city of Mitcham and the Aboriginal Lands Trust of South Australia, the former inmates returned to the site to design and build a memorial to

themselves and to some of the mission workers. Entering, the visitor reads an invocation majestic in its restrained simplicity:

LET EVERYONE WHO COMES TO THIS PLACE KNOW  
THEY ARE ON ABORIGINAL LAND  
THE SITE OF WHAT WAS ONCE COLEBROOK  
TRAINING HOME WHERE,  
BETWEEN 1943 AND 1972,  
SOME 350 ABORIGINAL CHILDREN LIVED,  
ISOLATED FROM THEIR FAMILIES AND THE BELOVED  
LAND OF THEIR ANCESTORS.

THIS IS PART OF THE COUNTRY OF THE KAURNA  
PEOPLE WHOSE HERITAGE AND PRESENCE  
CONTINUES TODAY.

Beyond the plaque the visitor is invited along paths in different directions passing granite rocks, a fountain, inscriptions, photographs, a sculpture of a grieving woman. The Colebrook Memorial Garden records, pleads, invokes, offers, reminds, beseeches and argues.

The fountain flows into the pool of tears which

REMEMBERS THE GRIEF OF THE FAMILIES OF THOSE ABORIGINAL AND  
TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER CHILDREN TAKEN AWAY  
AS A RESULT OF THE POLICY OF FORCIBLE REMOVAL OF INDIGENOUS  
CHILDREN.

Tiny frogs set in the granite enclosure symbolise the natural environment from which the children were removed. Cut into the granite, prints of the bare feet of a child become prints of school shoes which turn into high heels, symbolising more clearly than a thousand words that the unwanted journey towards White Australian culture lasts a lifetime.

Group photographs of the children follow past the fountain whose inscription portrays a family's grief:

AND EVERY MORNING AS THE SUN CAME UP THE WHOLE FAMILY WOULD  
WAIL. THEY DID THAT FOR 32 YEARS UNTIL THEY SAW ME AGAIN. WHO  
CAN IMAGINE WHAT A MOTHER WENT THROUGH?

BUT YOU HAVE TO LEARN TO FORGIVE.

Following is an account of separation through the children's eyes. The former inmate Doris Kartinyeri writes:

WE ARE THE STOLEN CHILDREN WHO WERE TAKEN AWAY  
TORN FROM OUR MOTHER'S BREASTS.  
WHAT CAN A CHILD DO?  
WHERE CAN A CHILD TURN?  
WHERE'S THE GUIDING HAND  
A CHILD IS MEANT TO HAVE?

The texts, inscribed in bronze in various locations of the several paths, reason with the reader rather than declaim. One begins:

COLEBROOK HOME BEGAN WITH THE UNITED ABORIGINES' MISSION IN 1924 IN DUNJIBA (ODNADATTA). THEN IN 1927 IT WAS TRANSFERRED TO QUORN IN THE FLINDERS RANGES, WITH 12 CHILDREN CARED FOR BY SISTER RUBY HYDE AND SISTER DELLA RUTTER. IN 1943 THEY MOVED HERE TO EDEN HILLS.

SISTERS HYDE AND RUTTER WERE EACH AWARDED AN MBE FOR THEIR UNSELFISH DEVOTION. THEY LEFT IN 1952 TO ESTABLISH TANDARRA HOSTEL, AND THE SUCCESSION OF SUPERINTENDENTS WHO FOLLOWED THEM AT COLEBROOK HOME ENFORCED A STRICT DISCIPLINE. MANY OF THE CHILDREN HAD BEEN REMOVED FROM THEIR FAMILIES UNDER THE GOVERNMENT'S POLICY OF ASSIMILATION, SOME NEVER TO SEE THEIR PARENTS AGAIN.

Sympathisers of the Stolen Generations perhaps are surprised at the careful wording of this plaque. Only 'Many of the children had been removed' – not all? The authors, clearly those who underwent the trauma, now proceed just as carefully to separate the good child carers from the bad. Hyde and Rutter are praised for their 'unselfish devotions'; others 'enforced a strict discipline'. That is not, perhaps, what we visitors, who weren't there, would expect to read. The former inmates are guiding our reactions and emotions. We've already received a signpost:

BUT YOU HAVE TO LEARN TO FORGIVE.

Yet although this is the memory-site of the inmates, the presentation leaves no doubt that even the happenstance visitor should become a participant, accept the dreadful saga, feel with the victims their anger and pain:

HEARTS BREAK, TEARS FALL, FEAR CRIED OUT  
FROM THE WRETCHED HANDS AND ARMS OF A MOTHER AND CHILD  
SEPARATED...

FEEL THE PAIN, TOUCH THE ACHE, CARESS THE TEARS.

The words are meant literally, for these actions are the rituals that the visitor can, and should, perform. Caress the sculpture of the mother, touch that little frog, put your hands, or feet, into the shoeprints, wet your hand in the pool of tears. The clearest message to be derived from the Colebrook memorial is that everyone, not only Colebrook inmates, not only Aboriginal people, should participate in this place of sombre reflection. These are some of the most powerful words inscribed on any Australian memorial, in one of the most moving of settings.

The lives of the Colebrook inmates were transformed here. In turn, by the collective act of memorialisation, they have transformed the site once secular and painful, into one Aboriginal and inspired. The powerful yet understated emotions held in the Colebrook memorial speak not only of psychological release but also of the power of the voice of victims alone, in planning their own statement of significance. The grounds of the institution are no longer only Kurna Aboriginal country: the site has become also the country of the Colebrook children. Their life on that site, the trauma they suffered, have made it theirs. The memorial garden has purified the dead place. The emotional release of *Bringing Them Home* made it psychologically possible.

Such is not the case, however, at the Children's Memorial at Reconciliation Place, Canberra.

A dozen monuments, not to the reconciled Aboriginal past but to a shared Australian future, stand somewhat awkwardly between Old Parliament House in Canberra and Lake Burley Griffin. They were commissioned and approved by a committee presided over by the

Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet. Reconciliation Place was opened by Prime Minister John Howard in 2002.<sup>18</sup>

The government, particularly Howard, had already been critical of *Bringing Them Home*, and more generally of what the Prime Minister saw as attempts to highlight 'black armband' histories at the expense of settler achievements. Hence 'Reconciliation Place' rather than 'A Memorial to the History of Aboriginal People since 1788'. Nor, indeed, do the existing monuments yield the slightest indication that there is anything to mourn.

One side of the memorial to Aboriginal children has inscribed upon it twenty or thirty Indigenous language words for 'child' or 'baby'. Half a dozen historic photographs show children in institutional care. The first shows three Indigenous children playing together in what might be a pre-contact state. A fanciful inference might be drawn that institutional care merely continued the happy years of childhood. Only one photograph, a newspaper advertisement for homes for Northern Territory children, suggests there to be anything controversial in the history of post-invasion Aboriginal child rearing. The captions, by the viewer's feet, yield little information.

The explanation for this bizarre denial of history is that the term 'Reconciliation' did not, for the Howard government, include the admission of past wrongs, nor invitations for forgiveness. Implicitly Reconciliation Place accepts Article One of the Australian Declaration Towards Reconciliation prepared for (but not accepted by) the government in 2000, at the end of the last term of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation:

We, the peoples of Australia, of many origins as we are, make a commitment to go on together in a spirit of reconciliation.

But Reconciliation Place firmly rejects articles 3, 6 and 8 of the Declaration:

We recognise this land and its waters were settled as colonies without treaty or consent.

Our nation must have the courage to own the truth, to heal the wounds of its past so that we can move on together at peace with ourselves.

As we walk the journey of healing, one part of the nation apologises and expresses its sorrow and sincere regret for the injustices of the past, so the other part accepts the apologies and forgives.<sup>19</sup>

### **TWO MONUMENTS SIDE BY SIDE**

Reconciliation Place contains two monuments to children, not one. While the preliminary designs of the 'official' monuments were submitted to government, spokespeople for the Stolen Generations organisations very angrily charged that they had been insufficiently consulted and that the planned memorial was an insult to their experiences. Eventually the planners gave way and the representatives were allowed to design their own childrens' monument to be placed beside the first.

So today, ten metres away from the first, stands the second of the childrens' memorials, this one clearly dedicated not to 'Aboriginal Children' but to 'the Stolen Generations'. On one side a fountain plays down and along apertures in the wall. On the obverse a huge iron sheet, already intentionally rusted, is perforated with round holes through which flowers and messages are thrust. On the iron are inscribed sentences of Stolen Generations testimony:

We had been playing... then the air filled with screams because the police came and mother tried to hide their children... Six of us were put on an old truck and taken to Oodnadatta.

The voice of the Reconciliation Report – a little sterner than the Colebrook memorial – reads in a bronze inscription:

We the separated children of Australia would urge you to look through our eyes and walk in our footsteps, in order to understand our pain. We acknowledge all Australians to acknowledge the truth of our history to enable us to move forward together on our journey of healing because it is only the truth that will set us all free.

*The truth that will set us all free.* Yes, but truth changes from generation to generation. Fifty years ago the only memorials to Aborigines were to heroic individuals responsible for saving the lives of Europeans. The re-discovery, aided by Aboriginal narrators and by historians of

frontier violence, began to change history books in the 1980s and memorials in the 1990s.

And truth is contested in any generation. A plaque on this second of the Children's memorials maintains that many Aboriginal children experienced 'overwhelming grief and the loss of childhood and innocence, family and family relationships, identity, language and culture, country and spirituality'. The national government responded:

the Commonwealth does not seek to defend or justify past policies and practices, but it does assert that the nature and intent of those events have been misrepresented, and that the treatment of separated Aboriginal children was essentially lawful and benign in intent...<sup>20</sup>

The extraordinary monuments at Colebrook and Myall Creek, speaking so strongly of the hard work of reconciliation, demonstrate how much may still be achieved.

The consequences of conflict endure for centuries.

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> This article first appeared in Louise Purbrick, Jim Aulich and Graham Dawson (eds), *Contested Spaces: Sites, Representations and Histories of Conflict*, Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2007, and is reproduced here with permission of Palgrave Macmillan.

<sup>2</sup> Text provided in Wikipedia on-line Encyclopaedia, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Explorers'\\_Monument](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Explorers'_Monument) 'Explorers' Monument'.

<sup>3</sup> Text in Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation, *Sharing History*, Key Issue Paper no 4, 1994, CAR, Canberra, p28.

<sup>4</sup> Text in Joanna Besley, 'At the Intersection of History and Memory: Monuments in Queensland', *Limina*, no 11, 2005, p44.

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/other/IndigLRes/car/1993/4/14.html>.

<sup>6</sup> Merrill Findlay, *Good Weekend*, 1 June 1996.

<sup>7</sup> Text reproduced in *Aboriginal History*, no 27, 2003, pvi.

<sup>8</sup> Peter Read and Jay Read (eds), *Long Time Olden Time: Aboriginal Accounts of Northern Territory History*, Institute for Aboriginal Development, Alice Springs, 1991, p45.

<sup>9</sup> It may be wondered why the monuments to older tragedies, like the La Grange massacre and the Kalkadoon battle described above, continue to be desecrated. Probably the reason is that both are situated in very public areas. Possibly also desecration, once established as a nocturnal activity among local youth, tends to perpetuate itself.



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- <sup>10</sup> Heather Goodall, 'Too Early Yet or Not Soon Enough? Reflections on Sharing Histories as Process', in K. Darian-Smith (ed), *Australian Historical Studies*, special issue, *Challenging Histories: Reflections on Australian History*, vol 33, no118, 2002, p21.
- <sup>11</sup> Goodall, pers comm.
- <sup>12</sup> [http://www.ilb.unsw.edu.au/past/past\\_artists/6-2.html#top](http://www.ilb.unsw.edu.au/past/past_artists/6-2.html#top).
- <sup>13</sup> Beverley (Gulumbali) and Don Elphic, *The Camp of Mercy*, Gulumbali Aboriginal Research, Canberra, 2004, p37.
- <sup>14</sup> <http://www.smh.com.au/news/New-South-Wales/Darlington-Point/2005/02/17/1108500193469.html>.
- <sup>15</sup> The Link Up organisations, such as Stolen Generations Link Up (NSW), offer to trace missing persons (parents or children) affected by former child welfare policies.
- <sup>16</sup> Federal Court of Australia, Lorna Cubillo and Peer Gunner v. Commonwealth of Australia, (Action Nos 14 and 21 of 1996).
- <sup>17</sup> Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, *Bringing them home: The Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families*, HREOC, Sydney, 1997.
- <sup>18</sup> One monument celebrates the achievements of the Aboriginal Senator Neville Bonner, and on the other side, the Northern Territory leader Vincent Lingiari. Another shows Indigenous and non-Indigenous people working together in the common cause of the 1967 Referendum which enabled all Aborigines to vote in federal elections. Bonner's monument includes his words: 'We've got to come together. That's what we want for Australia – a one people. Another monument records the achievement of Indigenous people in the armed services turning upon the slogan "Strength Service Sacrifice"'.
- <sup>19</sup> Website, 'Reconciliation Australia: Archive', 'National Reconciliation Documents'. The Council presented two major reconciliation documents to national leaders and the Australian people at 'Corroboree 2000'. They are the *Australian Declaration Towards Reconciliation* and the *Roadmap for Reconciliation*. The Appendix contains the *Declaration* and the four national strategies from the *Roadmap*;  
<http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/other/IndigLRes/car/>.
- <sup>20</sup> Senate Legal and Constitutional References Committee, 'Enquiry into the Stolen Generation', Federal Government Submission, Senator the Hon John Herron, Executive Summary ( March 2000);  
<http://www.australianpolitics.com/issues/aborigines/2000-govt-submission-on-stolen-generations-summary.doc>.