
THE MAN WHO CHANGED AUSTRALIA

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Author: BROWN H, QNP

*Historians will regard Henry Reynolds as an Australian who made a profound difference to the way we see ourselves as Australians. Some will regard him as the man who split a nation. **Heather Brown** reports *The man who changed Australia**

ONCE or twice in every generation, an Australian historian emerges who manages to give us a sense of ourselves.

A nation as young as Australia needs interpreters: our European history is a scant 200 years old, and it is a necessary part of the human condition to know who we are and what we are doing here.

We are familiar with the likes of Manning Clark, Geoffrey Blainey and, more latterly, Robert Hughes, whose book *The Fatal Shore* became one of the bestsellers of the Eighties. Now, it would seem, it is Henry Reynolds 's turn.

Suddenly, it seems, Reynolds is one of Australia's most influential and widely read historians. He has been called the man that has done the most to end the silence about the treatment of Aborigines in this country. His work was described as a seminal influence on both the Mabo and Wik judgments: it was Reynolds who turned up the fact that native title was recognised by the Imperial Government _ and it was Reynolds who proved how these rights were subsequently denied by the colonists.

His latest book, *This Whispering In Our Hearts*, made the transition from dark history to moving literature _ and the bestseller lists as well. He has finally been made a professor by James Cook University, the University of Tasmania awarded him an honorary doctorate in letters and the National Trust has listed him as one of our 100 ``living national treasures".

He keeps in the news for other reasons: his detractors find consolation in dismissing his research as black armband history, just another of academia's politically correct tomes.

Yet, somewhere in the middle of all this, Reynolds is also the rarest of breeds: the historian they know in the street.

He was 27 when he first arrived in Townsville. He and his wife Margaret had returned from two years in London and, when offered a post inaugurating Australian history at tertiary level in Townsville, he accepted.

It was 1966. The city was a dry frontier outpost of the north and the first thing that struck Reynolds was that there was no real sense of history there. There was little written about north Queensland, except by those who came from the south. "Lon Idriess, Glenville Pike, wild whiteman stuff written for a southern audience, exotic, outlandish, crocodiles and wild blacks," he says. "But in terms of people reflecting on their society, there weren't any."

Reynolds had just come back from Florence and was still in love with Renaissance history. But when he arrived in Townsville he realised he had to create a renaissance of a very different kind. "As soon as I began to teach I began to realise I had to do two things: I had to explain to youngsters who hadn't been out of NQ that the rest of Australia was different, but I realised if I just did that they would think that history was something that happened elsewhere, rather than their own back yards."

By 1969, Reynolds began to take a month out to teach local history and scrape together people with local knowledge and expertise. "People were just beginning to do some research, so we did these lectures and the students were very enthusiastic. It did exactly what I thought it would: it gave them a sense of having a community that had a past that was interesting."

"We used to call him Quirky Henry because he always had this quirky sense of humour and this cap of curly hair," said Fred Thompson who, along with his wife Lola, was a local Communist Party stalwart. "He was always well dressed, but sometimes he would come to lectures in bare feet. A lot of people wore bare feet in those days."

Once the lectures were published, students suddenly wanted to learn more about North Queensland history, and the material began to pour in on every conceivable topic, and gradually the publications took off.

Next came a major oral history project that attempted to record every elderly person over 70 in the region, both white and black. Gradually, an enormous sound archive was created that traced the history and the lives of its people and the university steadily built up its library of its own titles _ as well as a remarkable photographic archive. The North was spinning its own cocoon.

This is a curious man. There is something of the loner about him, although his strong personal relationships suggest otherwise; it is perhaps, a kind of separateness, the mark of a man who lives inside his own mind.

He plays classical music and lives in an old Queenslander on the side of a hill in Townsville. He does not use a PC, or even a typewriter. He writes everything in longhand in an office lined with books. He walks in the winter, swims in the summer, does the shopping and the cooking and regards his tropical garden as one of his best creations.

Reynolds met his wife Margaret while both were students in Hobart. They later worked as teachers in Burnie together, married in 1963, and 35 years later, there is still an obvious dependence on each other.

Margaret became a Townsville City councillor in 1979, a senator four years later and during her 16 year career as a Senator, was Minister for Local Government in the Hawke government in 1987. The couple's interests dovetailed, and they kept each other informed and inspired: she lobbied for landrights in the south while he taught politics in the north. In the end, he was the one who finally changed the law.

But one thing is clear: whatever you think of Henry Reynolds is pretty much tied up with what side of politics you are on in Australia. Because this is a man revered by the Left and reviled by the Right: "Henry is a false prophet," says northern politician Bob Katter. "He is leading both the whitefellas and the blackfellas off into a desert where there is no hope, there is just hatred and intellectual and spiritual barrenness.

"Henry has come to the Aboriginal thing with an entirely negative attitude: his viewpoint that the Aboriginals were annihilated I would deny emphatically; it is a gross over-simplification to give the Aboriginal people a negative image of themselves as losers." Senator Nick Minchin, Special Minister of State on Native Title, referred to Reynolds as a "partisan player" whose public pronouncements "colour his record as an objective historian." National Party Senator Bill O'Chee, meanwhile, simply declared that "as a historian, Reynolds makes a great social worker".

Mick Dodson, former Social Justice Commissioner, believes that there is a tendency "at least amongst conservative politicians, to want to go back to the heroic occasions of our past, but we cannot be selective about our history. We have to take it warts and all.

"Before Henry Reynolds, historians had a tendency to skate over what really happened in their history.

"I think he is a very courageous man."

Noel Pearson, the Cape York lawyer closely associated with both land rights cases, also credits Reynolds with telling the story. "Personally, most of my political outlook has been influenced by Henry's history," he says.

It is curious the way that southerners seem to miss something here: it is all too easy to dismiss Reynolds as a black-armband historian who has spent his life pushing the barrow for the blacks. But that only tells half the story.

"In the course of 26 years I taught everything there is to do with Australian history _ architecture, painting, gold rushes, democracy," he says with a hint of exasperation.

"The Aboriginal stuff only took up a few weeks in an entire course. But the blackfella thing had to be part of NQ history because students came from communities where there were Aboriginals, and they came with attitudes that ranged from supportive to hostile."

So there's the twist: if he hadn't taken the job in the north then he wouldn't have written the books.

The north was a very different place in 1966. Apart from the climate and the isolation, there was also a large black community _ something that Reynolds had never experienced.

``When I was on my way to London the boat stopped in Brisbane and I saw one chap who was Aboriginal and I thought `Wow!'; that's the first Aboriginal person I'd ever seen. I was 25 at the time."

He became involved in the community almost straight away. ``We had come with this young zeal, this sense that one of the things we should do was something to help the Aboriginals. After we had settled into our flat on Melton Hill there was an ad in the paper for OPAL _ One People of Australia League _ and Margaret said, `Oh, I'm going to that meeting'. She came back as secretary, and almost overnight she and Bobbi Sykes became activists."

Margaret didn't drive, so they struck a deal: she would do the organising while Henry would drive. With Lola Thompson and Roberta Sykes, they helped set up Kindergarten Headstart with Henry as one of the drivers doing the rounds to collect the kids in the car.

``It was his first real contact with Aboriginal people, and he used to shudder at the response of these kids to a well-dressed white person coming up their front path," said Fred Thompson. ``That sort of emotionally started Henry thinking about the relationship between blacks and whites in the district."

Around this time Reynolds paid a visit to Palm Island at the invitation of a white politician. In the police lock-up he stumbled across two girls, aged 10 and 11, who were dressed in rags with just a bucket in the corner: they were being punished because they had sworn at a teacher. The moment was to become a turning point in his life.

``If you come to live in the north you soon find out if you are a racist, because you are confronted with it every day," he says. ``You have to learn not to fall over and say blackfellas are always right and overcompensate and refuse to see the bad things. You have to be able to deal with an extremely complex thing."

There was a life away from the university. From the beginning, Reynolds became deeply involved in the community. Not long after he arrived he set up a branch of the Australian Institute of International Affairs and tried to get ``12 interesting people a year" to come to Townsville. Next came involvements with everything from chamber music to a dance company and a theatre company.

In 1967, Margaret Reynolds organised the inter-racial seminar held after that year's referendum, which many still regard as the real birthplace of a sense of self-determination. It was here that Reynolds began to notice a man called Eddie Mabo.

``We just drifted together and after a couple of years of getting to know him I was struck by the realisation that he was a fascinating person, an intellectual without a formal education. He only had primary English education, but when he would talk culture and ideas his face would just glow."

Their first exchange was simple: Mabo taught Reynolds about growing up in a traditional village culture while Reynolds taught him about Australian society.

Mabo found himself a job as a university gardener and Reynolds employed him as a part-time research assistant to collect black oral histories. Yet the project became a bitter disappointment for Mabo when he was refused permission to return to his island to record the history of his own people.

For Reynolds, listening to the stories from the black perspective collected by Mabo and others became the major turning point. "It was another example of Henry not confining himself to documents written by pompous Englishmen back in the colonial office," says Kennedy. "It was a very broad, very human approach to writing history."

As Reynolds listened to the old blackfellas telling their version of events, he began to realise you could tell a story from the other side: 12 years later, in 1981, *The Other Side of the Frontier* was finally published.

"One day, when Eddie and I were talking, I asked him if he was worried that someone would take his land while he was away. He said, 'oh no, that's Mabo land, everybody knows that'. And then I said, 'no, you don't own it, it's all crown land'. It was an absolutely decisive moment for him. He was shocked, horrified. He tried to go back again and again, he tried to hire boats and go home, but he wasn't allowed back on his own island.

"Soon after that I began talking to Eddie about a court case: I knew enough American history to know there had been famous court cases establishing Indian property rights. I thought he had a good case, that Murray Island was the best possible place to take on land rights. I used to say to him: 'Eddie, one day when you've had your case, you're going to be famous'."

In 1986 Reynolds _ after teaching himself property law in the High Court _ settled into the Australian National Library and pored over 150 microfilm files. Finally, he found confirmation that the British had, at some stage, recognised indigenous ownership of the land in a 1836 document from the Colonial Office to a settler's body, the South Australian Commission.

"If you start with the premise, 'hey, wait a minute, maybe they did think that the Aboriginals owned the land'," he says, "you start to pick up bits and pieces, but you don't have the clincher. And when you do find the clincher _ when the hunch and the evidence came together _ it was an amazing moment."

In 1987 he published *The Law of The Land*, aimed at scholars and lawyers, and when the Mabo judgment was handed down in 1992, one of the presiding High Court judges (Sir William Deane, now the Governor-General) sent Reynolds a note of appreciation. The note referred to Justice Dean and Justice Gaudron's line that Australia's treatment of its Aborigines had left a "national legacy of unutterable shame".

Mabo died in 1992, five months before he won the right to go back to his island home.

There was still more to be done. Reynolds began work with the legal team hired on behalf of the Wik people and spent another year digging up further evidence.

“What my work showed was what had been ignored: the nature of the pastoral lease, which was specifically designed to allow Aboriginals to use the land and allow for joint usage. The case was literally about the form of tenure and it showed that a very old form of tenure had been created for a very definite purpose.

“Although it's called a lease, it is something quite specific. It involves a specific time and a very clear set of circumstances, and it is created to allow Aboriginals to remain on their land. The British realised if they really locked up their land they would probably be destroyed, so they created this form of tenure for joint use. And that's an enormously powerful argument, both morally and politically.”

Reynolds grew up in West Hobart with views of the river and a sprawling orchard. His family was middle class _ four children, strict parents _ and deeply intellectual: his father, John Reynolds, was an industrial chemist at the local zinc works while his mother Isabelle had been one of Perth's first female university graduates.

“It was a fairly mixed situation,” he says. “The couple next door were radicals, the woman was a feminist and the suburb was working class, so I had to learn the culture of working class boys at primary school. My father had hundreds of books, the kids would just come and say, ‘Gee, look at your books’.”

WHILE his father worked as an industrial chemist, he spent every other moment educating himself, buying great literature and European history and becoming a member of the Royal Society. Later, he would write a biography of Edmond Barton, a history of mining and a history of Launceston.

Reynolds says of his father: “He was very loving, but he lived an intense mental life and was a bit awkward socially.” His relationship with his mother was different: “My mother was my friend.”

After four years at university, he started teaching without any training at all. “I walked into a classroom and said ‘Hello, I’m Mr Reynolds but you can call me Henry’. God, it was bedlam after that!”

Not long after he married Margaret, the couple travelled to London and, within a year of their marriage, had their first baby.

Around 1972, Reynolds published *Aboriginals and Settlers*, which became a textbook for schools and began what would eventually become 12 painstaking years of research. The book _ his first major work _ was published in 1981, and what made the book so extraordinary is simple: for the first time in Euro-Australian history, it documents what the Aborigines were thinking at the time.

“We have never been able to have any identity with Aboriginals,” Reynolds says. “Everyone knows about the Navajo and the Cheyenne and the Sioux, and they even know famous Indian chiefs. But we have absolutely no idea, or any sympathy, or any

admiration, for the Aborigines. But they were as worthy in defending themselves as the Maoris and the Zulus."

His latest book *This Whispering In Our Hearts* has proved easier for readers to be genuinely moved by the accounts of 19th century Australians who fought to improve the plight of Aborigines.

"This *Whispering In Our Hearts* confounds his Right-wing critics because he shows there were white heroes who stood up against the maltreatment of Aboriginal people," says Noel Pearson . "He is saying that there are white Australians who could be considered heroes."

In retrospect, there is no surprise that Mabo and Wik would come as such a thunderbolt, or create such bitterness and division, particularly in the bush, because three generations of Australians had grown up without any real understanding of their story. Blame it on the education system, if you like: schools were scarce in places like Queensland, and education basic, to say the least. Or you can blame it on the system itself.

Reynolds admits that the only reason he started to research the Aborigines was to compensate for his own lack of understanding when he arrived in Townsville.

"The book I had been given to teach Australian history _ the most important textbook used across Australia _ not only did not have anything much about Queensland in it, but it didn't have anything about Aborigines in it, either. They didn't even make the index: it was as if they hadn't existed.

"Now, many northern people might argue that what's happened isn't such a good thing, but it is their history that has been put back into the national story: you couldn't write the history of north Queensland without the Aborigines and the Islanders, so if you put the history of the north back into the mainstream, it changes the mainstream.

"And that was what the courts did: Mabo came from the most remote place in Australia, a place where the Europeans had scarcely reached, a self-confident community that had run its own affairs and he says the law must accommodate me, and the law must accommodate the reality of north Australia. And, unexpectedly, it did."

But, with the bush bitterly divided by Wik, what is the lesson in this? And where is the solution?

While he believes that there must be state support _ from finance to facilitation by governments _ the best solution is a local one. "These are people who have lived together for generations and they have to reach their own accommodation. With any luck, there will be success for things negotiated locally, and over a period of time even the most recalcitrant will realise that, hey, maybe there is something in this."

He says he doesn't get depressed about racists, but: "What disgusts me about the National Farmers Federation down in Canberra, who say 'extinguish, extinguish', is that there are people out there in northwest Queensland who live next door to the

people whose property rights have been taken away. You can say all the things you like down there but it has effects on the ground up here."

His next book _ working title Why Didn't We Know? _ is partly autobiographical: Reynolds reflecting on race and race relations in Australia.

AND it will include something else: by the time he writes the chapter on his family, he hopes that the genealogist he has employed to trace his family will have provided the evidence to another question: whether Reynolds himself carries any Aboriginal blood?

The suggestion was first published in a Sydney magazine, along with evidence provided by Henry's older sister Mary. There is a broken branch, it seems, in the family tree: Henry Reynolds' grandfather was a man called George Rule, son of Tasmania's Director of Education. Rule moved to Sydney and fathered a child in 1901, and when Rule's sister, Mary Reynolds, heard this, she sailed up to Sydney, collected baby John _ and returned to Hobart.

As the boy grew up, he was told he was the illegitimate son of the black sheep of the family and a "scarlet woman" in Sydney. Rule later died an alcoholic in Centennial Park. It was not until Mary Reynolds was reading Sally Morgan's *My Place* in 1986 that her curiosity was fired. They had been told that her father's mother was American; her subsequent investigations turned up that John Rule, then 32, had married a 19-year-old called Margaret Dawson three months after their son had been taken back to Tasmania.

Dawson was the daughter of a John Dawson and a Mary Williams. "We don't know who she is, where she came from: her parents seem impossible to find in the records of NSW: they just don't seem to exist, which is more likely to be Aboriginal than anything else," says Reynolds.

"He was brought up by his aunt, and she had all these stories about him being American, Gypsy, Indian, and he obviously looked quite different. He had very fuzzy curly hair and as a boy he was known as Fuzzy or Sambo, and when he went into the sun he went quite dark, so clearly there was something the family wanted to hide. I suspect his mother might have been part-Aboriginal.

"I have a genealogist doing the work, and anytime _ today, tomorrow _ she might come up with the evidence that disproves it. But until that work is done I think it is probable rather than possible."

So where does that leave Reynolds? "Oh, at a personal level, it doesn't mean much to me at all," he says quietly. "I mean, it doesn't alter who I am or what I am. I wouldn't be in any sense Aboriginal, because my father had the culture of an entirely European Australian."

He pauses for a moment. "But it would make me an octoroon, I reckon, one eighth, if I was anything at all . . . and it would give you a link with the infinite past in Australia, the sense that your family goes right back and that would be good. It raises all those intriguing questions about what you can inherit . . . but all the science says no, you cannot inherit cultural traits."

Then he shrugs, and looks over the veranda into the late afternoon.

He remains ambivalent about his success. "I'd still rather be anonymous, still rather be able to just sit back and just watch what's going on, but once you become known all that changes.

"You have to remember that when I began this research in 1970, it was 12 years before I published anything substantial. But the project was to change the way Australians thought about their past, and, through all sorts of consequences, the timing was right. So it wasn't just the power of my words or whatever I wrote: it was really that I wrote what was appropriate for the time, and that's partly luck, and partly that I saw and experienced the old ways of North Queensland just as they were coming to an end.

"I could have written this 20 or 30 years ago and nobody would have listened to me."

And so the trajectory of their lives has come full circle: Reynolds has left university life, his wife has retired from her political career and, after 33 years in the north, they are finally free to leave.

When the steamy wet season draws near, Reynolds will return to Tasmania, where he and Margaret have a convict cottage in Hobart. He talks about going home to his country "where the sights and sounds make perfect sense, where the sun and the shadows and the wind belong . . ." with the quiet knowing of someone who really understands what country can mean to a man.