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## 'History is Never Bloodless'<sup>1</sup>

### Getting it Wrong After One Hundred Years of Federation

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*During the Centenary of Federation celebrations in 2001 some historians and a raft of political and social commentators have failed yet again to come to terms with either this country's colonial past or the place of Aboriginal people in contemporary Australia. It is clear that we remain in many ways a young nation, and one that is yet to grow up.*

IN MARCH 2001 the journalist Martin Flanagan asked an important question of Australia's past in an essay, 'The Whole Truth?', which discussed, among other issues, the relevance, morality and political ramifications of using the terms 'stolen' and 'removed' in relation to the history of separating Aboriginal children from their families and communities. Flanagan commented, with dismay, in response to sustained attacks on Aboriginal people from within sectors of both the national media and the federal parliament, that rather than argue semantically over appropriate terminology 'the real question is how wide do we open the lens when telling the Australian story'.<sup>2</sup>

It was made clear during the year of the Centenary of Federation celebrations that Australia had chosen not to open the lens too far at all. Nor with too sharp a focus. Another Flanagan, Richard (Martin's brother), the novelist and historian, commenting recently on 'the circus entitled the Centenary of Federation', wrote that it would be 'flattery to describe this continuing debacle as stupid'.<sup>3</sup> Rather than an honest engagement with Australia's past, Richard Flanagan believes we have been served a 'veil of comforting lies and half-truths' resulting in the production of a history of comfort and complacency, unable to accommodate what he feels is the necessary reflection and even 'pessimism' from which a genuine future of value could eventuate.<sup>4</sup>

I sense in the writings of the Flanagans a mood of frustration and anger that Australia is stuck somewhere in the past, continuing to regurgitate shallow national myths and clichés that are able to do little more than provide the

<sup>1</sup> This quote is from John Birmingham's 'unauthorised biography of Sydney' *Leviathan* (Sydney: Vintage, 2000), 509. The next sentence reads 'someone always gets hurt'.

<sup>2</sup> Martin Flanagan, 'The Whole Truth?', *Age*, 1 March 2000.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Flanagan, 'Tasmania and Federation', *Island* no. 86 (Winter 2001): 7-18, 11. Richard Flanagan is Martin's younger brother. He is the author of the novels *Death of a River Guide* (Melbourne: Penguin, 1994), *The Sound of One Hand Clapping* (Sydney: Macmillan, 1994) and most recently *Gould's Book of Fish* (Sydney: Picador/Pan Macmillan Australia, 2001). He has also written historical non-fiction.

<sup>4</sup> Richard Flanagan, 'Tasmania and Federation', 11-12. Not wanting to selectively pick at Flanagan's essay, it is important to note here that the essay is in part concerned with the life of 'a remarkable Tasmanian, Andrew Inglis Clarke', a lawyer, legislator and thinker, whom Flanagan argues convincingly has been forgotten by Australia's big city 'polity and media', which 'regards the regions as the province of Hansonite hicks and Unabomber-type lunatics', 10.

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'dangerous and fertile grounds for the fanatic hearts among us'.<sup>5</sup>

With several of the fanatics in mind, it is obvious to me that damage continues to be done to Aboriginal communities in Australia resulting from the lack of transparency given to the colonial past. It is disappointing, but predictable, that both during the Centenary of Federation year and in discussions of Australia's history over the past decade that ignorance and at times open dishonesty continues to frame much of the national debate about the past. This persisting myopic view of history is peddled by the Prime Minister, John Howard, supported by an array of conservative intellectuals and commentators, who, in recent years have produced propaganda disguised as political and historical analysis, largely, but not exclusively through the journal *Quadrant*.<sup>6</sup> Their dishonesty has been most acute when discussing the historical context of issues which have encircled the relationship between black and white Australia in the past decade, being land rights and native title, the removal of Aboriginal children from their communities and the violence of dispossession.

I have commented on John Howard's 'relaxed and comfortable' view of history and his 'un-Australian' mantra elsewhere.<sup>7</sup> But still, it is necessary to dwell a moment on the opportunism that Howard brings to the discussion of history in Australia, illustrative of his view of both the past and contemporary place of Aboriginal people within *his* nation/state. This is understood no more clearly than by reflecting briefly on Howard's involvement in the recent very ugly 'stolen' versus 'removed' children debate.

This messy issue erupted following the comments of Lowitja O'Donoghue, the Aboriginal community leader and former head of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission, in a discussion about the manner in which she was removed from her family as a child. O'Donoghue, unnecessarily I believe, spoke about the circumstances of her institutionalisation as a child, stating that she did not consider herself to be a 'stolen' child, apparently as she was removed from her family with her father's permission. As a result of these remarks made in an interview with journalist Andrew Bolt of the Melbourne *Herald Sun*, John Howard, ever the opportunist in relation to matters of race, immediately took cheap advantage of the issue.<sup>8</sup> He claimed that O'Donoghue's comments

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>6</sup> The individual articles are too exhaustive to list here. But for the extensive coverage that *Quadrant* has given to these issues see in particular *Quadrant* November 1999, October 2000, November 2000 and December 2000. For a 'left' analysis of Keith Windschuttle's 'massacre myth' essays that appeared in *Quadrant* in October, November and December 2000 see Raymond Evans and Bill Thorpe's 'Indigenocide and the Massacre of Aboriginal History' in *Overland* 163 (Winter 2001): 21-39.

<sup>7</sup> For instance see Tony Birch, 'Black Armbands and White Veils': John Howard's Moral Amnesia, *Melbourne Historical Journal*, 25 (1997): 8-16 and 'The Last Refuge of the "Un-Australian"', *The UTS Review*, 7, no. 1 (May 2001): 17-22.

<sup>8</sup> For some of the print media coverage of this issue see *Age*, 24 February 2001 and 8 March 2001; *Weekend Australian*, 24-25 February, 2001. Martin Flanagan believes that although there were 'strands of truth' in what Andrew Bolt reported, 'the issue is what he made of them', Martin Flanagan, 'The Whole Truth'. For a comprehensive analysis of responses to the *Bringing Them Home* report see 'The Stolen Generations and the Right' in Robert Manne, *The Barren Years: John Howard and Australian Political Culture* (Melbourne: Text Publishing, 2001), 151-63.

were 'highly significant' and justified earlier comments by the then federal Aboriginal Affairs Minister, John Herron, that there 'was no such thing as a stolen generation'.<sup>9</sup>

As a result of her honesty, O'Donoghue provided Howard with yet another moment to ignore a past that did not sit well with his point of view. For a politician who appears at times obsessed with history, the past had now become conveniently irrelevant. Rather than dwell on or even give proper recognition to the history of the removal and incarceration of Aboriginal children it was now time to 'focus on the future' Howard stated, to that relaxing place when we cease to consider 'what may or may not have happened in the past'.<sup>10</sup> Howard's strategic use of the past is ever divisive, creating a wedged history to suit a wedge politics that in recent years has been central to the manner in which political forces have constructed a particular version of the past to suit the contemporary political climate.<sup>11</sup>

In addition to the spin on history put by politicians, historians and political commentators have also been waging a debate over Australia's past. Some of those who have become involved in this discussion bring into serious questioning the ability of historians, in particular, to maintain what is often claimed to be the 'special obligation' granted to a profession with pretensions for the status of 'custodians of memory'.<sup>12</sup>

It is regrettable but predictable that during the Federation celebrations the place of Aboriginal people in either contemporary Australian society or historical consciousness was widely misrepresented and abused. While attacks on Aboriginal people have a long history in Australia, this discourse moved into overdrive following the 1992 High Court's Mabo decision and then the release of the *Bringing Them Home* report by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission in 1997<sup>13</sup> (which investigated the removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families). Forces from within what academic and commentator Robert Manne describes as 'the small right-wing intelligentsia in Australia'<sup>14</sup> volunteered as the front-line forces, who would protect a particular view of the past that was apparently being challenged by an opposition labelled

<sup>9</sup> *Age*, 24 February 2001.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Obviously, this is stock behaviour of politicians regardless of attention given to issues of race and Indigenous communities. It is clear, though, that under the Howard regime and during the period when land rights, native title and the removal policies have been under scrutiny, attempts to control how the past is remembered and disseminated has increased dramatically. For an analysis of John Howard's view of issues of race, culture and history in Australia see Manne, *The Barren Years* and Andrew Markus, *Race: John Howard and the Remaking of Australia* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2001).

<sup>12</sup> Inga Clendinnin, 'Who's Telling This Story?', *The Australian's Review of Books* (March 2001): 11-12.

<sup>13</sup> See *Bringing Them Home: National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families* (Sydney: Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997).

<sup>14</sup> For a comprehensive refutation of the right's attack on both Robert Manne and the issues discussed in this essay, see Manne's 'In Denial: the Stolen Generations and the Right', *The Australian Quarterly Essay*, 1 (2001).

by *Quadrant* editor Paddy McGuinness as 'those Aboriginal leaders and white self-flagellators who prefer to tell a story of victimisation and blame'.<sup>15</sup> The troops of star-ship *Quadrant* would attempt to shield a particular Australian nationalist history project from any scrutiny addressed through counter-narratives of frontier violence and decades of abuse of Indigenous children.<sup>16</sup>

I will not indulge *Quadrant* any further. Robert Manne's inaugural *Australian Quarterly* essay 'In Denial: the Stolen Generations and the Right' has forcefully dismantled its polemic with his usual thoroughness. But then when the tone of the *Quadrant* argument lowers itself to a level where its editor uses the term 'false memory syndrome' in relation to the testimonies of Aboriginal people removed from their families, and equates those childhood removals with the experience of 'many of our most eminent doctors and lawyers ... "stolen" when they were sent off to boarding school' Manne's task is, at times, made somewhat easy.<sup>17</sup> Or as Melissa Lucashenko has put it, the 'self-serving drivel of right-wingers who wouldn't know an Aborigine if they drove over one on the way to the Melbourne Club' allowed Manne to 'slice' through such 'drivel' 'with a cool academic scalpel'.<sup>18</sup>

It is probable, though, that the *Quadrant* writers are not overly concerned with Manne's ability to unravel the flimsiness of historical and political 'analysis' presented in the journal. This is not an intellectual debate for *Quadrant*. Or a concern for historical objectivity and accuracy. Nor is *Quadrant* overly concerned with truth. This is understood by Manne in 'In Denial' where he writes that 'basic truthfulness was of little concern to those leading the anti-stolen generation campaign'.<sup>19</sup> It is a political and cultural battle with an understanding that valuable commodities such as land, national identity and memory are at stake. It is about protecting a mythologised history imagined as distinctly male, perhaps manifested in a champion cricketer wearing a slouched armed forces hat, sitting astride a dead racehorse. And it is about providing spin for the political forces in Australia allied to Howard's version of conservative politics.

An acceptance of *its own history* by non-Aboriginal Australia requires questioning, re-thinking, and a re-evaluation of the Australian psyche. This is not an easy task. There is a lot at stake, and much to be lost by those who believe that a pre-Mabo status quo should be maintained, where the past is remembered as a cultural *terra nullius* and the rights of Aboriginal people are forever denied. A more open Australian history project would impact on this regressiveness. Therefore a colonial view of history is upheld by conservative forces that in particular are able to prey on existing stereotypes of Aboriginal people, feeding a precondition to prejudice rather than recognising and attempting to overcome the nation's twin genealogies of dispossession and forgetfulness.

<sup>15</sup> P.P. McGuinness, 'Aborigines, Massacres and Stolen Children', *Quadrant* (November 2000): 2-4.

<sup>16</sup> See footnote 6 for the key articles produced in *Quadrant* and a key response.

<sup>17</sup> P.P. McGuinness, 'Poor Fella My "Stolen Generation"', *Quadrant* (November 1999): 2-4.

<sup>18</sup> Melissa Lucashenko, 'More Migaloo Words?', *Overland* 163 (Winter 2001): 15-16.

<sup>19</sup> Manne, 'In Denial', 90.

To uphold this position, it is helpful to disguise untruths within the mock-legitimacy of the established publication, the academic credential and the language of the scholar. Parading lies too openly is a little crude, even for 'political animals'. The Australian community must come to see that they are being defended, not lied to. To quote Richard Flanagan (*once more*), through a character from his most recent novel *Gould's Book of Fish* 'as one who knows something of the game of deceit ... swindling requires not delivering lies but confirming preconceptions'.<sup>20</sup>

As an exercise in uncovering this great historical swindle I would pay tribute to the value of essays such as Robert Manne's 'In Denial' which, with thorough research and clarity of language, is able to dismantle any pretence of scholarship within the arguments presented in *Quadrant* in particular (leaving many naked emperors prancing about). What I feel is more worrying, though, than the anti-Aboriginal propaganda that Manne engages with, are comments on colonial history more generally coming from historians and intellectuals in Australia who most often wear the label of 'objectivity', or 'the liberal'. I would suspect that those on this list would claim, along with historian, Inga Clendinnen, to be 'politically ... on Manne's side'.<sup>21</sup> I am not sure whose side they are on, but if it is Manne's, and by inference, Aboriginal communities in Australia, 'our' team is in trouble.

Clendinnen's recent essay 'First Contact' is in part a response to Manne's 'In Denial'. Additionally, it engages in a paper-chase and mild intellectual tussle with historian Henry Reynolds, who in March 2001 had written his own essay 'From Armband to Blindfold' for *The Australian's Review of Books*. The Reynolds essay was itself a critique of a series of 'massacre myth' essays written for *Quadrant* by the historian Keith Windschuttle.<sup>22</sup>

In an example of the virtues of pluralist history Reynolds and Clendinnen express quite different views of the first governor of the illegal occupation of Indigenous country, Arthur Phillip. In responding to a Windschuttle claim that white settlers would not kill 'Aborigines' as 'most colonists were Christians', Reynolds reminds readers that after failing to pacify 'the Aborigines' the Christian Governor Phillip was determined to 'infuse a universal terror' among Aboriginal people and had at one point 'ordered his troops to go out and take revenge for the spearing of his servant by killing ten Aboriginal men'.<sup>23</sup>

Clendinnen will have none of this criticism of Phillip. For her he not only displayed 'admirable anthropological "cool"', in not immediately ordering the destruction of the local Aboriginal people who were responsible for spearing him in the leg, he was, she states 'perhaps Australia's first multiculturalist'.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Richard Flanagan, *Gould's Book of Fish*, 21.

<sup>21</sup> Inga Clendinnen, 'First Contact', *The Australian Quarterly Essay*, 2, 2001, from 'Correspondence', 98-108.

<sup>22</sup> Henry Reynolds, 'From Armband to Blindfold', *The Australian Review of Books* (March 2001): 8. For Windschuttle references see above.

<sup>23</sup> Reynolds, 'From Armband to Blindfold', 8.

<sup>24</sup> Clendinnen, 'First Contact', 99, 103. See also Clendinnen, 'Spearing the Governor' in this volume.

Clendinnen is really asking us to stretch our ethnographic imaginings here. Arthur Phillip as forebear of Al Grassby seems reliant on the incompetence of his execution party, lead by Watkin Tench, to find enough 'Aborigines' to kill. But we do not need to prove Phillip a murderer to question Clendinnen's reading of this history. Her mention of Phillip's previous 'forced kidnappings' of local Eora men, and her descriptive language of this crime, 'he bagged the wily "Benne-long"', is playfully insensitive to the situation that Aboriginal groups faced as a result of invasion.<sup>25</sup>

I much prefer the reading of Arthur Phillip produced by John Birmingham, in the conclusion to his history of Sydney, *Leviathan*, where he speculates on what he would say to Phillip 'if his ghost did turn up' in contemporary Sydney. Birmingham believes that a question that 'might prove a little embarrassing' could be asked by Phillip about what became of the Eora 'and all the other tribes' in a city 'surrounded by ... staggering wealth and progress'. Rather than speculate on the more than obvious answer to such a question, Birmingham ends his history speculating on how he might engage with Bennelong if he were to accompany the spectre of Phillip. 'What would I say then?' he asks himself. 'Perhaps sorry might be a good place to start'.<sup>26</sup>

Moving away from an ethnographic sketch of Arthur Phillip, Clendinnen discusses Robert Manne's battle with 'the right', concluding 'I don't like adversarial history'.<sup>27</sup> It seems to me a particularly privileged position to observe the past from in relation to colonial Australia. As someone who has tried to find a space for Aboriginal History in the public domain for many years I am envious. I have spent the last ten years in lecture theatres arguing for the very existence of Aboriginal people. Each day is a battle for the acceptance of the legitimacy of an Aboriginal history, let alone a more open discussion of acts of violence committed by colonial society.

In Clendinnen's concluding remarks she reminds Robert Manne and her readers both, that 'in a democracy it is necessary to be able to count'.<sup>28</sup> Count what? Dead bodies? The numbers of 'stolen' versus 'removed' children? Until 1967 governments in Australia did not bother to accurately count the population of Aboriginal people in Australia, let alone the numbers who had been killed. They did not count the number of children 'stolen' as opposed to 'removed'. If we are to discuss the ability to count, it is white Australia that needs a maths lesson. If the history of colonialism were reliant on the empirically amnesic and fraudulent records of white Australia alone, then we might not address this history at all, which of course would be a perversely convenient outcome.

Clendinnen's seeming lack of understanding of this issue does not end with her call to empiricism. While she accepts that 'there are certainly more than a couple of rascals in the anti-report line-up' (referring to responses to the *Bringing*

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

<sup>26</sup> Birmingham, *Leviathan*, 510.

<sup>27</sup> Clendinnen, 'First Contact', 108.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

*Them Home* report), these comments, she claims, were a result of 'outrage at the use of the word "genocide" accompanied by the slamming-shut of minds'.<sup>29</sup> This clearly suggests that without the use of such a word, the same people Clendinnen refers to as mere 'rascals' would appear to have had more open minds.

As Robert Manne points out in his own response to the correspondence that resulted from 'In Denial' people such as (among others) Ron Brunton, of the Institute of Public Affairs and an occasional *Quadrant* contributor, had expressed similar political and intellectual views to those which have dominated the post-report environment for many years previously, when the 'G word' was not uttered.<sup>30</sup>

I agree with Clendinnen that many white Australians cannot countenance a discussion of the use of the word 'genocide' in relation to the abuse of Aboriginal people. But we should not deceive ourselves that it takes such a term, with all the horror attached to it, to 'slam-shut minds' as she calls it. When I researched and wrote an essay on the proposed restoration of Aboriginal culture in the then Grampians National Park in western Victoria in 1992, I found a large volume of racist letters written in opposition to the project, evidence that many people could not come to terms with the restoration of Aboriginal place names, none of which translate as genocide or referred to the deaths of Koori (Aboriginal) children who had been previously killed there by European squatters.<sup>31</sup>

What is at stake in Australia as a result of a past uncovered in the testimonies of those who gave evidence to the *Bringing Them Home* inquiry is not simply an acceptance of the evidence of these 'stories' as they are sometimes dismissively referred to, but the ability of white Australia to recover its own memory, its own past. What we have at present, in the absence of recognition of this history from either the Australian government or those 'in denial' is a cruel situation whereby Aboriginal people, and particularly those directly affected by the decades of the removal policies are expected to carry the burden of the memory of white Australia's sins.

In Raimond Gaita's discussion of 'Genocide and "The Stolen Generations"' he writes that *Bringing Them Home* alerted the community 'to other dark parts' of Australian History ... it has forced on them the terrible realisation that even in their own lifetimes Aborigines were the victims of brutal racism'.<sup>32</sup> Some people in Australia want this history addressed. Others do not. And while I would agree that the word genocide might stick in the throat of some people unable to face the 'terrible realisation' that comes with a more complete discussion of colonisation, it is the past itself which too many people cannot face or take responsibility for.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

<sup>30</sup> Manne, 'In Denial', 115-30.

<sup>31</sup> Tony Birch, 'Nothing Has Changed: The "Making" and "Unmaking" of Koori Culture', *Meanjin*, no. 2 (1992): 229-46.

<sup>32</sup> Raimond Gaita, *A Common Humanity: Thinking About Love & Truth & Justice*, (Melbourne: Text Publishing, 1999), 110.

While I agree, as Robert Manne, Raimond Gaita and others have commented,<sup>33</sup> that within the framework of the 1948 United Nations Genocide Convention the removal of Aboriginal children from their communities by the state demands that we debate the relevance of the crime of genocide in Australia rather than simply accept or deny such a possibility with an emotional response, we should dwell for a moment on Anna Haebich's salutary comment in *Broken Circles*, her study of the systematic attempts by successive governments to destroy Aboriginal family life. Haebich reminds us that genocide *may not* have occurred in Australia, not as a result of an absence of either the policies or will of governments, but as a result of the determination and vitality of Aboriginal communities, stating 'That Aboriginal people and their cultures were not eradicated by the relentless onslaught of these forces was due in large part to their dogged resistance and determination to survive.'<sup>34</sup> Haebich's exhaustive study illustrates that the rigorous research required to uncover a more complete understanding of the history of attempting to destroy Aboriginal family and community life is available to us. Other historians who have addressed so-called Aboriginal History do not seem to know where look for it.

In 2001, La Trobe University historian John Hirst presented the second of The Barton Federation Lectures addressing the theme 'Diversity and Unity in Modern Australia'.<sup>35</sup> Hirst's discussion of Aboriginal people begins with an interpretation of postwar assimilation, stating that 'in the 1940s and 1950s the aim for the Aborigines was that they were to "live like white Australians do"'. As part of this objective, Hirst writes 'in the 1950s Aborigines were moved from camps and rubbish tips on the edge of country towns to houses within towns' where they met with some 'hostility' from white Australia.<sup>36</sup> This understanding of assimilation, a common one amongst non-Aboriginal people, ignores the experiences of Aboriginal people across Australia at the time. An uncritical reading of an assimilationist policy statement that Aboriginal people would *live like white Australians* has little credibility beyond rhetoric.

The widespread prejudice against the Aboriginal communities in the 1940s and 1950s ensured that Aboriginal people would not be accepted as anything like white Australians. And this was not only as a result of local non-Aboriginal communities being opposed to an increase of Aboriginal people in their towns and suburbs. In fact, it is important to remember that when organisations such as the Victorian Housing Commission and other state housing authorities across Australia did begin to provide limited housing for Aboriginal people in the

<sup>33</sup> For a discussion of this position, and a response to Inga Clendinnen's understanding of genocide see Raimond Gaita, 'Why the Impatience? Genocide, 'Ideology' and Practical Reconciliation', *Australian Book Review* (July 2001): 25-31. See also his *A Common Humanity* and Manne's 'In Denial'.

<sup>34</sup> Anna Haebich, *Broken Circles: Fragmenting Indigenous Families 1800-2000* (Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Press, 2000), 207.

<sup>35</sup> From 'Barton Lecture', Sunday Special, Radio National, Sunday 18 February 2001. A transcript is available from [www.abc.net.au/rn/sunspec/stories/s](http://www.abc.net.au/rn/sunspec/stories/s)

<sup>36</sup> John Hirst, 'Barton Lecture'.



postwar era they replicated the fringe-camp experience by deliberately creating segregated estates, out-of-sight and out-of-mind from white Australia.

More importantly, the immediately pre-World War II Commonwealth and State 'Aboriginal Welfare' conference of 1937, which drew together both the history of a caste-based biological absorption ideology, supported by a repressive incarceration program, and the ideological framework for what would become the postwar assimilation policy, outlined both a past and a future where Aboriginal people had and would continue to exist 'between [the] two worlds' of the 'primitive black' and the 'civilised white'.<sup>37</sup> Cruelly illustrative of this is the experience of many of those Aboriginal children removed from their families in order to facilitate assimilation, providing the ideal outcome that Hirst refers to, being 'the expectation that the Aborigines would eventually be physically absorbed into the wider population and Aboriginal culture would disappear'.<sup>38</sup> A common experience of these children was relayed to the *Bringing Them Home* inquiry by 'Sarah':

We were constantly told that we didn't have families and that we were white children. It wasn't until we went across the road to school that we were called the names 'darkies' and 'niggers' and those sort of names. So when we were at school we were niggers and when we were at home we were white kids.<sup>39</sup>

Hirst goes on to talk about what he terms the 'self-determination' period of the 1970s, where 'within a multi-cultural Australia, Aborigines were to choose how and where they were to live'.<sup>40</sup> Hirst's definition of self-determination is a particularly eurocentric one, reliant upon culturally and geographically specific stereotypes to justify itself. According to Hirst, the key 'advantages' of both self-determination and the reasoning that 'Aborigines are attached to their way of life' is due to a lifestyle choice, saying 'Here are people with few monetary sources who are not tied down. They assume that they can move freely around their realm. They travel without forethought'.<sup>41</sup>

I would be hard-pressed to convince an Aboriginal person subject to curfews, police harassment and the outcomes of mandatory sentencing legislation that they are free to move about their realm (or that they have a realm). The simplicity displayed by Hirst degenerates further when he additionally states that 'Aborigines who believe that road accidents and ill-health may be caused by sorcery will not take the precautions we do' and that for Aboriginal women, who apparently live happily in 'filthy' homes, domestic cleanliness is 'whitefellas business'.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>37</sup> See *Aboriginal Welfare: Initial Conference of Commonwealth and State Aboriginal Authorities* (Canberra 1937).

<sup>38</sup> John Hirst, 'Barton Lecture'.

<sup>39</sup> *Bringing Them Home*, 173.

<sup>40</sup> John Hirst, 'Barton Lecture'.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

Are these the comments of a historian? Does an anecdote of a government 'clerk in the Territory', apparently relayed to Hirst, amount to empirical research? Perhaps he has actually counted the number of Aboriginal people in Australia who believe that road accidents are caused by sorcery. Most Aboriginal people that I know believe that road accidents are caused by a motor vehicle hitting either an object or person, often at a high speed.

Also, it is regrettably necessary to note that many Aboriginal women know all about domestic cleanliness. So many of them were trained in government institutions so that they would keep house, without the equity of an assimilated wage, for white women who were too busy to clean up after themselves. And these Aboriginal women, now quite elderly, still clean their own homes, almost pathologically, never free of a form of state surveillance that could result in children being removed from their families.

Hirst's lecture is dominated by a reflection on recent history which lacks any depth of understanding of white Australia's treatment of Aboriginal people. I will dispense with his claim that the 1993 Native Title Act is 'the treaty we now have'. But in doing so I would refer him to the statement of Justice Oldney of the Federal Court (in the recent Yorta Yorta Native Title case), that the Yorta Yorta's rights had been 'washed away by the tide of history'.<sup>43</sup> I would, though, comment further on Hirst's reference to what he regards as the potential 'absurdity' of identity politics in Australia.

Hirst presents us with a hypothetical Aboriginal family, 'mixed' in cultural and ethnic descent. The apparent 'absurdity' would arise, according to Hirst, when one of the children, claiming her Aboriginal status, demanded 'compensation for the loss of her ancestral land, language and culture', with one of the outcomes being 'the division and bitterness' resulting from people in the same family being categorised differently. Hirst's argument lacks any historical engagement with or an understanding of the cruelties of colonial identity politics, and is additionally ignorant of aspects of the Native Title process.

Australian governments have historically often categorised Aboriginal people within the same family, mothers and their children, brothers and sisters, as having separate identities. The callousness of the Victorian government's 'half-caste' *Aborigines Act* of 1886, which attempted to destroy Aboriginal identity is the earliest legislative example of this.<sup>44</sup> The 'mixed' family that Hirst constructs has been looked upon with disgust historically, with miscegenation being the dirtiest word in Australia's race relations history.

He should also be aware that Native Title legislation already contains, in principle, compensatory clauses for those identifying as and accepted as Aboriginal people, who have lost control and access to their 'traditional' land. If Hirst's hypothetical, self-identifying Aboriginal teenage girl asserts her *right* to be called

<sup>43</sup> Katrina Alford, 'White-Washing Away Native Title Rights', in *Arena Journal*, no. 13 (1999): 67-83.

<sup>44</sup> For a discussion of this legislation and other forms of identity categorisation see John Chesterman and Brian Galligan, *Citizens without Rights: Aborigines and Australian Citizenship* (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1997) and Haebich, *Broken Circles*.

an Aborigine, is accepted as such by her Aboriginal community and has her genealogy prized open and verified by government officials then she has an inherent right to seek either Native Title to land or compensation through the Native Title process. If Hirst thinks that the scenario is absurd then so is the Native Title process which he tolerates as a treaty.

The contradictions evident in Hirst's 'Barton Lecture' highlight the difficulties facing white Australia if it is to fully recognise the rights of Aboriginal people. In the year 2000 we witnessed marches by hundreds of thousands of people across Australia in support of reconciliation, expressing what the media coined 'good will' toward Aboriginal people. We should welcome this. But it will take more than goodwill for real change to occur in Australia, and a more complex understanding of the issues than that offered by John Hirst.

We have a long way to go in this country. In a discussion of the *Bringing Them Home* report last year we were lectured by ex-Governor-General, Bill Hayden, that 'self-pity is not a remedial course for the socially disadvantaged'. The report, according to Hayden, 'was based on faulty memory syndrome, lacked investigative rigor and maligned decent Australians'.<sup>45</sup> The only Aboriginal people named by Hayden were Lorna Cubillo and Peter Gunner, two Aboriginal people who presented a case before the Federal Court based on their belief that the Australian government was responsible for neglect that they had suffered as a result of being removed from their Aboriginal families as children.<sup>46</sup> Hayden is either completely ignorant or suffers from false memory syndrome himself. In the outcome of the case brought against the Commonwealth by Lorna Cubillo and Peter Gunner, Justice O'Loughlin stated:

I accepted Mrs Cubillo's evidence that she was viciously assaulted by a missionary on the staff of the home and I accepted her evidence that she was very unhappy and starved for affection during her time at Retta Dixon [Home] ... I accepted Mr Gunner's evidence that he had a most unhappy childhood at St Mary's and I accept that he was the victim of sexual assault by one of the missionaries during his time at St Mary's.<sup>47</sup>

Australia needs to address this history of violence rather than allow people to abuse those who have already suffered and then parade themselves as eminent Australians during the Federation pantomime.

What the year of the Centenary of Federation will be remembered for domestically I am not sure. Much of course will be an irrelevance in light of the events and aftermath of the September 11 attacks on New York's World Trade Centre. But if we are to begin to remember in Australia in a way that does not so deliberately censor that which does not appeal to the nation's sense of self it will be important to reflect on the comment of historian Thomas Butler

<sup>45</sup> For reports of the Hayden speech at the University of Tasmania see the *Age* 12 and 13 October 2000.

<sup>46</sup> For a discussion of the case see the Robert Manne essays 'Stolen Lives' and 'The Return of Assimilationism?' in his *The Barren Years*, 51-62 and 63-5 respectively.

<sup>47</sup> This is from the text of Maurice O'Loughlin's summary, reprinted in the *Age*, 12 August 2000.

that 'memory not only causes pain, it heals'.<sup>48</sup> Healing will not happen without remembrance.

In 2001 the processes of reconciliation appear either stalled or relegated to a cliché looked upon with suspicion. The federal government has refused to deal with issues of recognition and social justice resulting from the recommendations of the *Bringing Them Home* report. Meanwhile native title legislation has become a time and (lots of) money affair. Some are looking for new solutions. These are both necessary and welcome. In Noel Pearson's 'rights and responsibilities' argument centred on the need for the recognition of the human and legal rights of Aboriginal communities, on the one hand, and an urgency to speak out against and combat the destructiveness of substance abuse and welfare dependency rampant within some of the same communities on the other, we are confronted with a problem of enormous proportions. And it is a problem that requires both immediate action and long-term thinking. A dilemma, but one that must be dealt with.<sup>49</sup>

Pearson clearly realises that he is in danger of becoming the straw man of a range of political forces both within and outside the Aboriginal community, but sees also a need to 'fearlessly' pursue that which he believes in.<sup>50</sup> He must be commended for this. It is clear that some commentators are intent on very selectively sampling the Pearson thesis in order to avoid dealing with present and past injustices committed against Aboriginal people. It is important that we deal with these issues before we conveniently move to what journalist Paul Kelly calls 'a post-apology climate', that rhetorical Shangri-La, of John Howard's practical reconciliation.<sup>51</sup> In this place, Aboriginal people who have been dispossessed by white Australia, who have been separated from their family as an outcome of the removal policies *may* be able run the water-tap or flush the toilet and know that this is the generous compensation for their lost land, their lost children. The 'Aboriginal problem' will have solved itself after more than two hundred years, without the problem ever being seriously addressed or some responsibility accepted by white Australia. And we will not have a politician to thank. Or a journalist, or historian. The salvation of 'the Aborigine' will be in the hands of a plumber.

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<sup>48</sup> Thomas Butler, 'Memory: A Mixed Blessing', in *Memory: History, Culture and the Mind*, ed. Thomas Butler (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 26.

<sup>49</sup> Pearson has been presenting this thesis for some time now, but it is put extensively in his recent Charles Perkins Memorial Oration, republished in full, interestingly enough in *Quadrant* (December 2001): 9–20.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>51</sup> Paul Kelly, 'Rights Alone Will No Longer Do', *Weekend Australian*, 2–3 June 2001.