



Robert Manne, the Apology and Genocide

PATRICK WOLFE challenges Manne on Indigenous matters and finds his definition of genocide questionable.

Robert Manne enjoys an immunity from left-wing criticism that is not of his own making. Through the Howard era in general, and the culture wars in particular, Australian public discourse became so debased that we were left with Melbourne's legendary two choices — which, of course, meant only one choice. Given Manne's opponents — *Quadrant*, Windschuttle, Bolt, Ackerman, Henderson, the whole pack — our opponent could only be our friend. We were left with Buckleys.

I do not believe that Manne wanted it this way. I take it that he would rather engage in principled debate than soil his hands with the muck that the culture warlords have thrown at him. After all, in contrast to their crudely negative agenda ('Get Manne!') his own agenda — human rights — has been as positive as it has been consistent. The issue that detached him from the editorship of *Quadrant* was, after all, his refusal to suppress injustices done to Aborigines. Since that time, in newspaper and journal articles, in his collection *Whitewash*, which comprehensively refuted Windschuttle, in his *Quarterly Essay* ('In Denial: The Stolen Generations and the Right'), and in innumerable public interventions, Manne brought humanity and conviction to the hard work of keeping the public spotlight on a number of issues of central concern to the Left — in particular, on the abuses meted out to Aboriginal people, refugees and asylum seekers.

I feel obliged to gesture to Manne's achievements before moving on to criticise him because I think we still have to get used to the death of Howardism, a national rehabilitation to which Manne himself made no small contribution. The culture warlords, and everything they stood for, have been rejected, left to fulminate in marginal irrelevance. So let us not resuscitate them by worrying that they might divide us. We have a left agenda to discuss, an agenda of transformation and improvement. Let us debate that agenda — agreeing, disagreeing, qualifying and refining — with vision and purpose, and without making allowances where no allowance is due. Should I feel moved to criticise Robert Manne or someone like him in the future, I hope that I shall simply do so, without feeling a need to justify what we should take for granted: that the fact I admire his contribution does not require me to do so uncritically.

So — with these preliminaries observed — a recent article by Manne has crystallised a concern that his utterances have been giving me of late. His writing has struck me as being more about Robert Manne than about its ostensible topic. No doubt this reflects his almost undisputed status as the voice of the left-liberal conscience in Australia. He has been widely encouraged to the notion

that he channels liberal opinion, an enshrinement that blurs the distinction between what is emancipatory and what Robert Manne thinks. I don't believe that Manne set out to manufacture this role for himself. Rather, it is another symptom of the self-visited Howard-era consensus that anxiety about the culture warlords has imposed on the Left. All the same, it lends a certain solipsistic quality to his writing, which can come across as Manne thinking out loud rather than as Manne engaging with others. Given the oppressive history of the idea that White people should decide what is good for Aborigines, this is particularly unfortunate where Aboriginal issues are concerned.

In the article I have in mind ('Sorry Business: The Road to the Apology', *The Monthly*, March 2008), Manne is candid about his failure to address the issue of the Stolen Generations until the publication, in 1997, of the *Bringing Them Home* report, which opened his eyes to what had been going on and prompted him to action. Commendable though his candour is, however, Manne's article fails to see his own silence on the Stolen Generations as contributing to a more general silence in Australian public life — a 'great Australian silence', to use the late Bill Stanner's memorable term — that prolonged and intensified the damage done to thousands of Aboriginal people. In the same article Manne also makes some misleading observations on the question of genocide in Australia. In my view, the juxtaposition of the two misconceptions — ignorance about the Stolen Generations and obfuscation concerning genocide — is symptomatic of Manne's enclavement within a conversation among White people. This conversation elevates perspectives maintained by White people (in particular intentions) over impacts experienced by Aborigines.

Somewhat hubristically, Manne's article seems to substitute his own autobiographical experience for the national narrative. The article does not concern the Labor government's road to the Apology so much as his own tardy road to becoming aware of the Stolen Generations. He presents his surprise at the revelations contained in the *Bringing Them Home* report as representative of a more general Australian ignorance ('Like very many Australians, I was shocked ...'). If so few Australians suspected, one wonders, why had the report been commissioned in the first place? In any event, so far as access to information is concerned, Manne was not just an ordinary Australian but a professional scholar. Moreover, at the time, he was also editor of an influential national journal. Such qualifications are hardly congenial to a plea of ignorance.

A decade and a half before Manne's awakening, the New South Wales Ministry of Aboriginal Affairs, by no means an obscure institution, had published an article by Peter Read entitled 'The Stolen Generations'. Six years later, in 1989, Read joined with Koori writer Coral Edwards (with whom he had co-founded the organisation Link-Up) to edit a collection of Stolen Generations narratives entitled *The Lost Children*. This book was published in Sydney in 1989 by Doubleday — again, hardly an obscure institution. Though acknowledging Read's priority, Manne's article offers no explanation for why he himself, a scholar, had overlooked the public record for so long. Perhaps his editorship of a conservative journal had insulated him from uncomfortable literature. Whatever the reason, the literature was there and Manne had ignored it. Had he investigated this literature, he might have been prompted to inquire further, in which case he might have discovered, as Read himself had discovered and acknowledged, that the term 'Stolen Children' had been used by Aboriginal people for decades. The year before Read's first Stolen Generations article, in 1982, the Kuri Production company had put out a film on the issue, *Lousy*

Aboriginal people not only knew about the Stolen Children. They also know about genocide. Ask any one of them. Manne would not seem to have done so — or, if he has asked Aboriginal people, he has ignored their unanimous response.

Little Sixpence, featuring Margaret Tucker's unforgettable testimony — which Kevin Rudd would cite many years later in the course of the Apology — of how she had been abducted as a child and how her mother had reacted to her loss. *We had* been told, only we hadn't listened.

Following Peter Read's lead, rather than Aboriginal people's earlier one, various White Australian scholars went into print on the question of the abductions of Aboriginal children. One of the outcomes of this focusing of scholarly attention was a program called 'Frontier' that the ABC ran in 1997, which Manne credits with leading him to 'discover' the transcript of a conference of state Aboriginal affairs officials that the Commonwealth had convened in Canberra in 1937. This transcript contained statements by Western Australian Protector of Aborigines A. O. Neville (together with many equally damning ones by officials from other states and territories) that inspired Manne to launch his public campaign on the issue of the Stolen Generations. Patricia Jacobs had analysed and quoted from this transcript in the journal *Australian Aboriginal Studies* (surely a basic source for such matters) in 1986. Over the following few years, numerous scholars from a range of disciplines followed Jacobs' example. The point is that Manne's long-standing personal ignorance about the Stolen Generations was just that — personal. It was not in any way a reflection of information that had been circulating in the public realm for over a decade,

information that was readily available to him as a scholar.

Why is this important? Someone of Manne's prominence, whose benign contribution to Australian public life is not in question, can be forgiven the odd lapse into egocentrism. But here the hazards of his self-referential narrative become inescapable, because the real issue is not Manne's personal history but that of the nation. In dressing up his own scholarly failure to consult the public record as part and parcel of a generalised national myopia, Manne presents that failure as understandable and, accordingly, as forgivable. In so doing, he endorses the alibi of ignorance — nobody could be expected to know — whereby successive Australian governments have refused to take responsibility for the havoc that assimilationist policies have continued to wreak upon thousands of Aboriginal people's daily lives. Surely, of all people, a Jewish writer on the Holocaust should think twice before protesting that we didn't know. To the extent that it existed, ignorance on the part of White Australians would be a further indictment rather than an extenuating circumstance. It could in no way mitigate the impact sustained by Aborigines. In postponing the national acknowledgement, the alibi of ignorance has held up the process of reparation and restoration that the crimes committed against Aboriginal people demand.

Aboriginal people not only knew about the Stolen Children. They also know about genocide. Ask any one of them. Manne would not seem to have done so — or, if he has asked Aboriginal people, he has ignored their unanimous response. In his *Monthly* article, he summarily dismisses the possibility that aspects of the policy of Aboriginal assimilation could have amounted to genocide, as that crime has been defined under international law by a convention to which Australia was an early signatory. For this purpose, however, he drops his populist posture (one of 'very many' Australians) in favour of a pre-emptive assertion of scholarly authority. 'Almost no one', he loftily assures us, 'would now support the way *Bringing Them Home* arrived at the conclusion that Aboriginal-child-removal policies involved the crime of genocide'. In so pronouncing, Manne seems oblivious to the unavoidable conclusion that this makes Aborigines (let alone anyone else) 'almost no one'. Lower down he adds that 'it is now generally acknowledged' that this conclusion of the report was wrong. His authority would seem to be its own evidence for these statements, since none other is on offer. In any event, the statements are flatly wrong.

In contrast to Manne and myself, who have dipped into the issue of genocide in connection with other studies, Australia boasts a number of scholars who have devoted the time, labour and expertise necessary to master a large and complex body of literature to the extent required to become internationally recognised specialists in genocide studies. For their definition of genocide, some of these scholars have adhered to the wording of the 1948 *Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide*. Others — a noted Australian example being Inga Clendinnen — have, with varying degrees of blitheness, preferred definitions of their own dispensation to the internationally agreed one. These idiosyncratic definitions have tended to be narrower than the one adopted at the United Nations, offering comfort to perpetrators and

potentially disqualifying some victims from compensation. By contrast, scholars who stick to the UN definition, among whom are to be found the more eminent international authorities in the field, display a remarkable degree of unanimity. Tony Barta from La Trobe University, Ben Kiernan (who, though from Yale University, is an Australian), Robert van Krieken from the University of Sydney, A. Dirk Moses, also from the University of Sydney, Colin Tatz, formerly of Macquarie University, together with a number of others — long-time specialists who run centres and edit journals devoted to genocide studies — have stated unequivocally and repeatedly that the Australian program of abducting Aboriginal children amounted to the crime of genocide at international law. Either Manne is deliberately suppressing their conclusions or, here again, he has too much reading still to do.

In the course of ignoring these scholars' conclusions, Manne's article misrepresents the wording of the international convention on genocide — admittedly by omission, but it is a highly significant omission of words that follow straight on from ones that he leaves in. Manne writes as follows: 'According to the relevant international

Whether Manne presents himself, inappropriately, as an ordinary man of the people or, misleadingly, as an expert whose authority relieves him of the burden of proof, he speaks as a White person talking to other White people about Black people.

convention, the crime of genocide involves the intention to destroy a people'. The actual wording of Article 2 of the UN Convention, which Australia signed, is as follows: 'In the present Convention, genocide means ... acts committed with intent to destroy, *in whole or in part* [my emphasis], a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such'. Apart from Manne's substitution of the term 'people' for the term 'national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such', an issue that I shall leave aside for now, his omission of the qualification 'in whole or in part' would not seem to be accidental. This is because, if he had left this crucial phrase in, he could not have proceeded to cite, as evidence for his contention that the charge of genocide should not apply in the case of the Stolen Generations, the consideration that: 'Historical research has made clear that the policy of biological absorption was restricted to Western Australia and the Northern Territory, and to the 1930s'. Manne does not identify this 'historical research', which Read and other historians could readily rebut in relation to other states (though I suspect that he has in mind a single article, in my view of questionable merit, by Russell McGregor). Be that as it may, even if Manne did have reliable historical evidence that the program was restricted to Western Australia and the Northern Territory, it would still be manifestly clear that it applied to Aboriginal people 'in part' — at least, this would be clear if Manne had not omitted that very

qualification from the wording of the Convention. The fact that the Jewish people exterminated in the Holocaust were almost without exception restricted to Europe (and, in the main, to the 1940s) does not affect the genocidal nature of the crimes that the Nazis perpetrated against them. In any event, the notion of a single Aboriginal people is a whitefella construction. As Dirk Moses has pointed out, there are many Aboriginal peoples. To target any one of them for destruction is genocidal.

Most scholars who have concluded that Australian policies in relation to the Stolen Generations were genocidal (this is not to prejudice the issue of frontier homicides) have done so on the basis of Article 2 (e) of the Genocide Convention, which provides that the act of 'forcibly transferring children of the group to another group' amounts to genocide. This seems straightforward — or, at least, straightforward enough to merit consideration before summarily dismissing the question of genocide. In my less authoritative opinion, another section of the Convention also provides an at least prima facie ground for indicting the Australian program. Article 2 (d) provides that 'imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group' (assuming, of course, that these are imposed with intent to destroy a group in whole or in part) amounts to genocide. In this connection, it seems to me that, where the practice of abducting Aboriginal children 'succeeded', it would have brought about a situation in which second-generation offspring were born into a group that was different from the one from which the child/parent had originally been abducted. On this basis, there would seem to be abundant evidence of genocide being practised in post-war Australia on the basis of Article 2 (d) alone. Moreover — and, again, contra Manne — it makes no difference whether the policy was framed in biological or cultural terms (or, as was more often the case, in both). The issue is whether or not and to what end the children were abducted, rather than the terms in which that practice was rationalised. It is impossible to draw simple either/or lines between culture and biology in such a case. Where a child was physically abducted, the eventual outcome was as much a matter of a social classification as it was of a body count. Nonetheless, the intentional contribution to the demographic elimination of the 'relinquishing' group was unequivocal.

Whether Manne presents himself, inappropriately, as an ordinary man of the people or, misleadingly, as an expert whose authority relieves him of the burden of proof, he speaks as a White person talking to other White people about Black people. This is not the only way in which Aborigines are excluded from his discussion. More concretely, the substitution of his own personal perspective for a grander one (public opinion, scholarly consensus, the national narrative) has the effect of postponing, marginalising or denying Aboriginal people's right to have the enormous historical crimes that have been committed against them redressed.

Patrick Wolfe is a historian at La Trobe University.