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WA Cawthorne
A fight at the Murray,
watercolour, 1844
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Back cover image
WA Cawthorne
*Murder of Biddel & two others by
the Pt. Lincoln natives, 1848*
State Library of New South Wales

Frontier Conflict

*The Australian
Experience*

*Edited by
Bain Attwood
& S G Foster*

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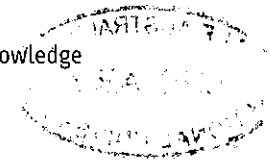
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²⁰ Reynolds, 'From armband to blindfold', *Australian Review of Books*, vol. 6, no. 2, 2001, p. 8; Windschuttle, 'The fabrication', p. 7.

²¹ Markus, *Australian Race Relations, 1788–1993*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1994, pp. 46–9.

²² Ryan, 'The Aboriginal history wars', *AHA Bulletin*, no. 92, 2001, p. 32; Dominick LaCapra, 'Review of *The Killing of History*', *American Historical Review*, vol. 103, no. 1, 1998, p. 149; Stevenson; David Myton, 'Windschuttle's way', *Campus Review*, vol. 12, no. 2, 2002, pp. 10–11; Windschuttle, 'How not to run a museum', *Quadrant*, vol. 45, no. 9, 2001, p. 12.

²³ Windschuttle, *The Killing of History*, p. 246; Windschuttle, 'The myths of massacres', Part I, p. 21.

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Ann Curthoys

Constructing national histories

Throughout the 1990s and now in the early years of the twenty-first century, Australia's past has been hotly contested territory. Such contests are not peculiar to Australians, but are important in many other countries, including Japan, Germany, the United States and Britain. As a former colonial and settler society, however, Australia has some particularly difficult issues to confront. How brutal and destructive was our own colonial past, and what, if anything, ought non-indigenous Australians now think and do about it? Are apologies, reparations and conciliation in order? Public debates over the meaning of the past for the present have focused on a number of fronts: land rights and native title; the child-removal policies of the past; and the nature and degree of violence and death on the frontiers of settlement between 1788 and the 1930s. The forum at the National Museum of Australia confronted the last of these issues. In this chapter I do not consider the details of the debate about frontier conflict but rather the broader political and historiographical context in which the debate has occurred.¹

In the last two decades of the twentieth century, Aboriginal people challenged existing Australian understandings of the colonial past by emphasising their prior occupation, direct experience of invasion and racism, and their ongoing struggles for survival. This counter-history was told especially through written life stories and oral testimony, and had a significant impact on historians, the law and public life. Aboriginal voices successfully converted the bicentennial commemoration of 1988 from a celebration to a reconsideration of the meaning of white settlement itself. Several years later, the view of history embedded in two legal decisions concerning native title — the Mabo decision of 1992 and the Wik decision of 1996 — challenged the deeply held beliefs of Australians. Aboriginal prior ownership and occupancy of

the land was for the first time legally recognised, and the moral and legal basis of white Australian society further brought into question.

Aboriginal testimonial reached its maximum public impact and apotheosis in *Bringing Them Home*, the report of a government inquiry into the 'stolen generations' — those indigenous people taken away as children from their parents through most of the twentieth century. This 1997 report shocked many in describing Australian child-removal policies as genocidal, and as motivated by the desire to destroy Aboriginal identity and distinctiveness altogether. The question of 'genocide' was then debated in relation to both child-removal policies and the motives and actions of settlers on the frontier. The magazine *Quadrant* became the flag-bearer of angry rejections of any suggestion that 'genocide' might be an applicable term in the Australian context, whether as a description of child-removal policies or of conflict on the frontier.

Thus the specific debate over how many people were killed, and why, has a larger context. It is a debate about the moral basis of Australian society. Where an older tradition of Australian historiography saw British colonisation of the Australian continent as a worthy enterprise, leading to the transplantation of European civilisation and people, and to political, social, cultural and especially economic development where there had been little before, more recent historical work — dubbed by its opponents as 'black armband' history — tells a profoundly discomfiting story of invasion, colonisation, dispossession, exploitation, institutionalisation and genocide. Aboriginal people, who appear in the earlier accounts either as savages who had to be fought if settlement were to proceed or as harmless people offering little resistance and tending simply to fade away in the face of British civilisation, appear in current historical accounts clearly and unambiguously as victims of white aggression and racism. In the last 20 years or more, a recognition that white settlement occurred at the expense of the indigenous occupiers of the land has influenced much Australian historical representation, from widely read books such as those by Richard Broome and Henry Reynolds, through to school textbooks and popular cultural forms such as television series, film, poetry, novel, song and drama.

At the same time as this kind of history has been growing in prominence and acceptance, so also has its widespread rejection. Conservative politicians detest it, for it tends to locate them, as critics of current indigenous demands, in a rejected past.

So do many other non-Aboriginal Australians, who, facing significant economic problems of their own, are in no mood to consider themselves as 'invaders' or the beneficiaries of colonisation. Many do not wish to be told their whole society was built on a process of invasion and child theft; they want, instead, to re-assert pride in their history, institutions and culture. In public debate on radio and newspapers, many non-Aboriginal Australians openly express a preference for returning to a 'positive' understanding of Australian history, which assumed or argued explicitly for the rightfulness of colonisation, and emphasised colonists' struggles and difficulties, processes of 'pioneering' and settlement, and the hard-won achievement of economic development, political freedoms and social harmony.

The angry rejection of the idea that Australia has a racist or violent past, I argue in this chapter, has its basis in some deeply held beliefs about white Australian historical experience. Many non-indigenous Australians have difficulty in seeing themselves as the beneficiaries of the colonisation process because they, like so many others, from the United States to Israel and elsewhere, see themselves as *victims*, not oppressors. The idea of settler innocence remains powerful in Australian popular culture, just as it does in the United States. Australian popular historical mythology stresses struggle, courage and survival, amidst pain, tragedy and loss. There is a special charge associated with the status of victim in Australian historical consciousness, and it is notable how good non-Aboriginal Australians are at memorialising their own sufferings. Looked at more closely, the contest over the past is perhaps not between positive and negative versions, but between those that place white Australians as victims, struggling heroically against adversity, and those that place them as aggressors, forcing adversity onto others.

Several commentators have already noted this attraction to a self-image of suffering, sacrifice and defiance in defeat. Andrew Lattas, for example, has examined how Australian nationalist discourses emphasise a struggle in which the pioneer, the explorer and the artist all suffer as they seek to possess the land: 'Their suffering takes on the epic proportions of a pilgrimage that redeems and heals the nation'. White settler suffering, he suggests, becomes a means for conferring right of ownership to the land. Ross Gibson also points to the salience of stories of heroic failure in Australian popular culture, although he sees this tradition as having waned in the 1980s, replaced by new themes of success. Gibson seems to me too hasty here; new

themes did emerge in the 1980s, but they did not replace or efface the old. Indeed, the revitalisation of the film industry, and the consequent flood of representations of older stories in new film and mini-series modes, did a great deal to give the long-standing themes of heroic defeat new life and vitality. In *Sacred Places*, Ken Inglis has explored in great detail the ways in which Australians remember their own suffering from World War I and other conflicts, and indeed many commentators have noted that the Anzac story provides one of the most important and enduring of white Australian myths of grief, loss and sacrifice.²

I want to build on this insight regarding the attraction to failure and defeat as a powerful part of Australian national identity, and apply it more specifically to Australian historical consciousness. I will consider a number of ways in which Australians see themselves as victims in their own history, especially in their popular understandings of the taking of the lands of indigenous peoples. My focus throughout is on foundational white narrative and mythology as created by, and associated with, those who came from Britain and Ireland, making up the majority of immigrants before World War II, and still the forebears of the majority of the population.³ My argument is that the emphasis in white Australian popular historical mythology on the settler as victim works against substantial acknowledgment and understanding of a colonial past, and informs and inflames white racial discourse.

Exodus

Australian popular historical narratives embody major themes of Judeo-Christian history — expulsion, betrayal, suffering, revenge, persistence, guilt and love. For such a secular society, the influence of biblical stories is profound, but this is not really so odd. As Benedict Anderson has suggested, nationalist thought rests on older religious dreams and ideals, while Regina Schwartz has noted that 'sacred categories of thought have not just disappeared. They have lingered into the modern world where they are transformed into secular ones'.⁴ Stimulated by Edward Said's re-interpretation of the Exodus story from a Canaanite perspective,⁵ Schwartz draws attention to the continuing resonances of the story. The Israelites who had gone to Egypt to escape famine, grew to a great multitude, to the alarm of the Egyptians, who enslaved them. Under the leadership of Moses, the Israelites fled from their oppressors in Egypt, wandered

through the desert, and came to the Promised Land — the land of Canaan — that they then conquered and occupied. The original Exodus, fleeing bondage under the Pharaoh, becomes the moral justification for the later conquest of the Canaanites. The earlier victimhood warrants the later aggression.⁶

The biblical narrative of Exodus rests on a rhetoric of victimisation. A persecuted past is invoked to legitimate present policy. Conquest is justified by the injustices of the past, and a new society and people are created through the displacement and destruction of another people, the Canaanites. Several scholars have noted the way the story of Exodus is reworked to provide the foundations for both American and Israeli national historical narratives. The pilgrims left Britain for America, a new Promised Land reserved by God for his new chosen people, liberating themselves from the tyranny of the British Pharaoh. Sacvan Bercovitch argues that the Puritans, identifying New England as the New Canaan, saw the worldly enterprise of colonisation as a mission to restore mankind. Where Christian thinking traditionally saw the material and the spiritual as unrelated, the Puritans thought that in New England alone salvation and riches went together. These ideas became the foundation of an enduring national dream of a distinctive American mission.⁷

Deborah Bird Rose has taken up Bercovitch's idea: Americans feel they have freed themselves from a 'hardened, sullen-tempered pharaoh' in order to inhabit a New Promised Land and secure a New Covenant with God. She argues that in contrast to this American foundational mythology, Australian historical consciousness has a somewhat different narrative of exile and expulsion:

Australia, in contrast, was from the first conceived as hell on earth, and its foundation owes more to the myth of Expulsion than to any myth or dream of liberation. In the first decades the majority of the people who settled here did so not to escape Pharaoh, but at the precise will and directive of Pharaoh ... The Expulsion myth situates Home as Eden, the monarch as God, and the convicts as sinful fallen people doomed to a life of toil and sweat amidst thorns and thistles.

It seems to me, and this is hinted at by Rose, that in the Australian case both stories sit together, the story of the fall and expulsion from Eden, and the story of the exodus from Egypt for the Promised Land.⁸

The pioneers

The victimological narrative, protean, durable and endlessly resurrected, involves first of all the convicts, expelled from their own country and condemned to suffer in another. While public discourse during much of the nineteenth century was harsh on convict discipline and morality, by the twentieth century convicts were often seen as innocent victims of a harsh British penal and economic system. Even more innocent were the free immigrants drawn mainly from Britain and Ireland who had to fight for New World freedoms against the class rigidities and hierarchies of the Old. If the convict era called up a strange fascination with a past almost too horrible to contemplate, it was much easier to remember the 'pioneers', a loose general category of early settlers admired for their difficult victory in the task of settlement. Australia is not alone, of course, in memorialising these pioneers: they are common to all settler societies. Australian pioneers have their own particular features, though. They are thought to have endured the harshest continent on earth, with its endless drought, fire and flood, their struggle most poignantly signified by the near starvation in the first years of settlement, or in the story of the selectors later in the century who attempted to carve out a living from an often unforgiving land.

Originally denoting simply those who came early, before self-government, John Hirst points out that 'pioneer' came to acquire its particular associations with land in the 1890s and the early years of the new century, when a newly forming nation created a nationalistic golden age from the recent past. The pioneer legend was developed in poem, painting, novel and history book, and continues still in these forms, as well as in reconstructed villages, re-enactments and anniversary celebrations. It is popular because it is so inclusive of Anglo-Celtic Australia, crossing the serious social divides of class and gender, celebrating small and large farmers, and men and women alike. Indeed the presence of women pioneers was particularly admired, since the bush and the outback were originally thought of as no place for a white woman at all. Women were the symbol of the arrival of domesticity and civilisation where none had existed before.⁹

Far less inclusive in terms of class and gender, the radical nationalist legend celebrated the itinerant male workers of the bush and the outback. Building on the work of earlier writers and intellectuals such as Vance Palmer, Russel Ward's popular

history *The Australian Legend* (1958) argued that the characteristics that Australians like to think of as typically Australian — 'a fiercely independent person who hates officiousness and authority, especially when these qualities are embodied in military officers and policemen' — derived from the itinerant workers of the pastoral industry. These men of the lower classes bequeathed a distinctive Australian type, with profoundly egalitarian values: self-deprecating laconic humour, irreverence, anti-authoritarianism, informality and anti-pomposity. This Australian masculine type lives on, especially in film, from Chips Rafferty in *The Overlanders* (1946), to Jack Thompson in *Sunday Too Far Away* (1975), Bryan Brown in *A Town Like Alice* (1981), and most notably Paul Hogan in *Crocodile Dundee* (1986).

Yet these two enduring national myths — the pioneer legend and the 'Australian' legend — are not so opposed. Although one is inclusive of class and gender, forming as Hirst suggests 'a national rural myth, democratic in its social bearing, conservative in its political implications', and the other is a more class-conscious celebration of the male worker, both are silent on race and ethnicity. Both refer only infrequently to non-British immigrants, and both obscure the dispossession of indigenous peoples almost entirely. In both, the hardships endured by white people, especially British and Irish white people, are at the heart of the narrative.¹⁰

The quarrel with nature

In the pioneer legend, the obstacles the settler-hero must fight are mainly the land itself. The desert and the bush become powerful adversaries. In this sense of the land as antagonist, Australian popular narratives are again not alone. Margaret Atwood says of the Canadian North, for example, that 'popular lore, and popular literature, established early that the North was uncanny, awe-inspiring in an almost religious way, hostile to white men, but alluring; that it would lead you on and do you in; that it would drive you crazy, and, finally, would claim you for its own'. Where Canadian sense of danger centred on snow, ice and water, Australian fears were, not surprisingly, located in heat, fire and thirst.¹¹

The land as relentlessly hostile is only one strand, and over time a declining one, in settler perceptions of the Australian landscape. Not everyone saw it in this way, and there were some, perhaps many, who loved the countryside from the beginning. The

desert was, and remains, a source of ambivalence, explored at some length in JW Gregory's *The Dead Heart of Australia*, describing a journey around Lake Eyre in 1901–02. For Gregory, the desert was fascinating, casting a spell, as deserts do everywhere: 'I feel a longing to see the great bare desert again — to enjoy once more its soothing solitude, and the exhilaration of its buoyant sense of freedom'. Yet the desert can also be 'an enemy that must be fought'. Its 'distances are vast, and they have to be wearily traversed; its heat is intense, and it has to be patiently endured'. There is the horror of being hopelessly lost, and the agony of death by thirst, the fear of going mad. Experience in the desert enables us to 'understand how Nature can rival the malignant tortures of the Inquisition'.¹²

Such fears are expressed most profoundly in the Burke and Wills story, with its tragic coincidences and bitter defeats in the struggle with nature. Alan Moorehead perceptively pointed out that the Burke and Wills story quickly acquired the status of an Australian myth because it 'perfectly expresses the early settlers' deeply-felt idea that life was not so much a struggle against other men as against the wilderness — that wilderness that made all men equal anyway. The quarrel, basically, was with nature'.¹³

The quarrel with indigenous peoples

So far, this chapter has alluded to those forms of settler historical narratives in which indigenous people barely appear. Indeed, indigenous invisibility is part of their power. Peter Otto suggests that the popular narrative of horror in the desert, of the land and landscape as the malignant Unknown, is neither innocent nor transparent. Rather, it offers a colonial society a way of displacing the conflict between settlers and indigenous people onto a more acceptable narrative of a direct conflict between the settler and the land itself. The land and the indigenous peoples become merged, the former foregrounded, the latter denied a place in history at all.¹⁴

Frantz Fanon wrote eloquently of the way the settler regards himself as the original inhabitant: 'He is the absolute beginning: "This land was created by us"'. To which we might add: 'We discovered it'. And so it happened in Australian historiography, although this erasure of the Aboriginal presence was more a twentieth than a nineteenth-century understanding of the colonial past. Nineteenth-century histories

varied widely in their attitude to Aboriginal people and cultures, sometimes sympathetic, more often crudely racist, regarding them as 'savages' and 'low on the scale of humanity'. But they usually did exhibit an awareness of a history of frontier conflict, and worried over its moral implications. Nineteenth-century observers were generally aware of the rapid population decline among indigenous people that seemed to follow Europeans everywhere, and spent their time not denying its existence but rather trying to work out why it happened and how it might accord with God's will.¹⁵

In common with other colonial and settler societies, the colonising societies developed narratives of reversal, placing indigenous people as the invaders and settlers as the defenders of their land. Captivity narratives were one form of fictional representation of colonisation, in which the white woman, especially, is at the mercy of her Aboriginal captors. A particularly long-standing form of narrative reversal has been the idea that it is white settlers who belong, who own the land, who are at home, in contrast to the indigenous people, perceived as nomads, whose hold on it is tenuous and undeserved. A contemporary indigenous leader, Galarrwuy Yunupingu, has pointed to the irony of a situation in which Aboriginal people who stay on their own land as far as they are permitted, to protect it, become in white Australian mythology the wanderers, the nomads, on 'walkabout', while those inveterate wanderers, the European immigrants who have crossed oceans and strayed far from their homelands, and who continue restlessly to roam and wander within the continent, are named the settlers, those who stay at home.¹⁶

Such concerns and debates, however, gradually faded from public consciousness, written histories and school texts in the twentieth century. Sometimes the nineteenth-century interest in Aboriginal habits and customs survived in a section (rarely a whole chapter) on Aboriginal life, but more often such information vanished completely. Walter Murdoch's school history, *The Making of Australia: An Introductory History* (1917), was explicit on the exclusion of indigenous people from white Australian histories:

When people talk about 'the history of Australia' they mean the history of the white people who have lived in Australia ... We should not stretch the term to make it include the history of the dark-skinned wandering tribes who hurled boomerangs and ate snakes in their native land for long ages before the arrival of the first intruders from Europe ... for they have nothing that can be called a history.



Sean Leahy, *Courier-Mail*,
21 November 1997

Murdoch's comments are more complex than they first appear: his reference to 'intruders' is an interesting metaphoric shadow of the very past he wishes to deny; and one need not disagree entirely with his notion of the incommensurability between Aboriginal and European senses of time and space, only with his purpose.¹⁷

It was still like this as late as the 1950s and 1960s. In fact, the general histories produced to meet the growth in university and other study of Australian history had minimal Aboriginal content.¹⁸ These were the histories through which Australia's current national leadership was educated. In them, as Tom Griffiths has discussed, the conflict between settlers and indigenous people in the past was elided, suppressed, forgotten or viewed as so long ago that we in the present have no connection with those people or those events. None of our ancestors were individually involved in conflict with Aboriginal societies. In any particular place, violent conflict is denied — 'there were no Aborigines here', the people might say. The Aboriginal people simply 'disappeared', faded away and died out, at the hands of the mysterious forces of colonisation, not the agency of real people.

The return of the repressed: new Aboriginal histories

Yet this claim to the land, by right and history, did not go uncontested. Just when it seemed that Aboriginal prior occupation had all but disappeared from Australian consciousness, several developments led to a new interest. Political concern with racism in its local and international manifestations increased, along with a growing protest movement seeking equality and social justice for Aboriginal people. And in a broader cultural sphere — in fiction, painting, photography and film — interest in indigenous people had never really gone away. As many cultural critics have noted, representations of Aboriginal people outside academic history continued to be endless, abundant and innumerable, much like European exoticism and Orientalism, ranging from sympathetic to hostile, sometimes achieving considerable understanding, more often a white-centred form of appropriation and ignorance. It was in history and in thinking about the immediate past that it was especially difficult to come to terms with a prior and continuing indigenous presence.

In this new climate, those who crossed disciplinary boundaries were the first to resurrect historical knowledge of Aboriginal–European relations — in archaeology, art history, ethnohistory and political science. In the 1970s, some young historians were influenced by new left critiques of racism arising from opposition to South African apartheid, racial segregation in the United States, opposition to Australian involvement in the war in Vietnam, and from an emerging Australian civil rights movement. Some of the new histories that emerged at this time had a Marxist emphasis on the destructiveness of capitalism in a colonial context, and focused on its drive to exploit both land and labour, racial ideology and the institutionalisation of Aboriginal people. Sometimes these new histories, in their enthusiasm for uncovering and naming a brutal colonial past, risked portraying Aboriginal people as outside history, passive victims in a tragic narrative of destruction and despair. During the 1980s, as Bain Attwood notes in his chapter, some historians set out to redress the balance, drawing attention to examples of accommodation and more positive interaction. Others began to place greater emphasis on indigenous peoples' perceptions, understandings and active responses to colonisation.

By the late 1990s, the issues had shifted again. On the one hand, historians and their audiences began to tire of histories that homogenised Aboriginal people and

societies as the victims of the past; on the other, historians began to wrestle with the 'genocide' issue, stimulated both by *Bringing Them Home* and an expanding international debate about genocide and modern history. It is time to return to the genocide question, this time evoking these wider contexts. The great twentieth-century Polish-Jewish jurist Raphaël Lemkin (1901–59) is generally regarded as having defined the term in his 1944 study, *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe*. His definition became the basis of the 1948 United Nations Convention, although that convention significantly altered his original formulations. Lemkin proposed in 1944 the new concept of 'genocide', deriving the term from the Greek word, *genos* (tribe or race), and the Latin, *cide* (killing, as in tyrannicide, homicide or fratricide). In Lemkin's definition, genocide signified a coordinated plan of different actions aimed at the destruction of the essential foundations of the life of national groups, with the 'aim' of annihilating the groups themselves. Genocide was to be considered as manifold and wide ranging, a composite of actions rather than one single defining act or mode by which the destruction of a nation or group's foundation of life was to be secured. It certainly could involve direct mass killing, but was not confined to it. For Lemkin, destruction of the essential foundations of the life of a group could occur in many ways. It involved consideration of the political, social, legal, intellectual, spiritual, economic, biological, physiological, religious and moral. The new crime was to be defined as a two-fold process, as Lemkin explained: 'Genocide has two phases: one, destruction of the national pattern of the oppressed group; the other, the imposition of the national pattern of the oppressor'. Genocide meant that one national pattern was to be destroyed, to be replaced by the imposition of another.¹⁹

The definition of genocide adopted in the UN Convention, now the basis for international law, was narrower and the requirement of proven intent was made stronger. Even so, the convention defined genocide as including:

any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such:

Killing members of the group; Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part; Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.²⁰

Whether we follow Lemkin's or the UN's definition, it is clear that genocide has a meaning far beyond direct killing and that it describes the destruction of the identity and ways of life of one people, and their replacement by another.

Several authors have pursued the question of whether colonialism is inherently genocidal. The purpose of colonisation in settler societies, after all, was to destroy the 'national pattern of the oppressed group' and to impose another in its place. Native American historian Ward Churchill argues that the greatest series of genocides ever perpetrated in history occurred in the Americas. From the outset, entire civilisations were eradicated. The pattern of destruction inaugurated by Columbus continued as the pattern of genocide for the Americas, where a population estimated to have been as great as 125 million was reduced by something over 90 per cent. He goes on to argue that settler-colonies around the world established during European expansion post-1492 in the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and Argentina, are inherently genocidal. In order for a settler-colony to be a settler-colony it requires 'wholesale displacement, reduction in numbers, and forced assimilation of native peoples'.²¹

In his remarkable book, *'Exterminate all the Brutes'* (1997), Sven Lindqvist traces the genealogy of the idea that extermination of entire peoples, later renamed genocide, was inevitable and necessary. In this search, examples from Australian history, at first seemingly irrelevant, gradually acquire major importance. Lindqvist traces the growth of the idea of extermination, or genocide, as the inevitable byproduct of progress, reminding us of what every Australian historian knows, that so great was the death rate of indigenous people in all the British colonies of settlement that the House of Commons established a select committee in 1837 to enquire into the impact of colonisation. Its eventual report recognised the rights of indigenous people to land and recommended that steps be taken to stop the slaughter.

Despite the attempts of British colonial authorities, and of non-government Aborigines protection societies, both in Britain and in the colonies, in the 1830s and 1840s, the slaughter continued. British observers were especially mindful of the destruction in Tasmania. Lindqvist draws attention to the attractions of new racial science which, by the 1850s, depicted these huge population losses as the result of inevitable processes whereby the higher races displaced the lower, bringing civilisation and progress to the world. In these circles, as Lindqvist puts it, 'the Tasmanian [case]

became the paradigm, to which one part of the world after another yielded'. When the Anthropological Society debated the extinction of the so-called lower races on 19 January 1864, the opening speaker reminded his listeners of the fate of the Tasmanians, and predicted the next to depart the world stage would be the Maori. Indeed, so fixed had this idea of the complete extermination of the Tasmanian Aboriginal people become, that it was only with the rise of the Tasmanian Aboriginal movement in the second half of the 1970s, along with the publication of Ryan's book *The Aboriginal Tasmanians* in 1981, that most people learned there were indeed descendants. Genocide had taken place, but it had not been complete.²²

Fears of expulsion, again

In the light of histories that recognise that colonisation of Australia produced population losses on a massive scale, it is a little curious to find today such strong reaction to the idea that the concept of genocide could be applied to the Australian colonial past.

Such strong reactions prompt an inquiry into their social, cultural and psychic basis. It seems to me that beneath the conservative critics' angry rejection of the 'genocide' label in particular, and the 'black armband' view of history in general, there is a fear of being cast out, exiled and made homeless again, after two centuries of securing a new home far away from home. There are fears of both a direct loss of land if Aboriginal land claims succeed, and a symbolic loss, of the legitimacy and permanency of the non-Aboriginal Australian's sense of home. In this phenomenology, if we fully recognise indigenous claims to the land and to a history of invasion, if we have a sense of living in someone else's country, we are, in a metaphorical if not a literal sense, in danger of homelessness again, of having to suffer yet again the original expulsion from the British Eden.

In the rejection of a history of land seizure by force, we have a white Australian version of *ressentiment* — Nietzsche's 'triumph of the weak as weak' — described by Wendy Brown as the 'moralising revenge of the powerless'. Brown argues that in contemporary society, in which 'individuals are buffeted and controlled by global configurations of disciplinarity and capitalist power of extraordinary proportions, [and] are at the same time nakedly individuated, stripped of reprieve from relentless

exposure and accountability for themselves', *ressentiment* will abound. As unprotected yet individually accountable spectators in an uncontrollable world, white Australians see themselves as battling courageously against enormous odds. They construct for themselves a past that allocates the land as won through suffering, and therefore theirs.²³

And so it is that in Australia, as in other settler societies, the trauma of expulsion, exodus and exile obscures empathetic recognition of indigenous perspectives, of their trauma of invasion, institutionalisation and dispersal. The self-chosen white victim finds it extremely difficult to recognise what he or she has done to others. The legacy of the colonial past is a continuing fear of illegitimacy, and therefore an inability to develop the kind of pluralist inclusive account of the past that might form the basis for a coherent national community. Debates over the numbers killed on the frontiers (and these are important debates to have) are for all these reasons not simply debates about numbers, or about empiricist versus postmodernist or Marxist or any other philosophy of history. They are, inevitably, no less than debates about the moral basis of British settlement in the past, and of Australian society in the present.

The author wishes to thank John Docker, as usual, for his intellectual input.

¹ This chapter rehearses, at the request of the editors and in a substantially revised form, some of the arguments advanced in my earlier article, 'Whose home? Expulsion, exodus, and exile in white Australian historical mythology', *Journal of Australian Studies*, no. 61, 1999, pp. 1–18.

² Andrew Lattas, 'Aborigines and contemporary Australian nationalism: Primordiality and the cultural politics of otherness', in Gillian Cowlshaw and Barry Morris (eds), *Race Matters: Indigenous Australians and 'Our' Society*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, 1997, pp. 234–5; Ross Gibson, *South of the West: Postcolonialism and the Narrative Construction of Australia*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1992, pp. 173–4; Ken Inglis, *Sacred Places: War Memorials in the Australian Landscape*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1998.

³ There are of course many other migrant settler narratives in Australia, narratives of progress of the mainly European but sometimes Asian and Pacific communities that also memorialise the hardship and sacrifice of their first generation. Such immigrants, especially those from northern Europe, may be quite

easily incorporated into, and made part of, the Anglo-Celtic narrative. Or they may, especially if from southern Europe or Asia, have their own quite separate stories of struggles and hardships that have less to do with the land and indigenous people and more to do with the ethnocentric and racist Anglo-Celtic majority itself. The complexities of 'whiteness' are a subject for further research.

⁴ See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*, Verso, London, 1983, pp. 11–16.

⁵ See Edward Said, 'Michael Walzer's Exodus and Revolution: A Canaanite reading', in Said and Christopher Hitchens (eds), *Blaming the Victims: Spurious Scholarship and the Palestinian Question*, Verso, London, 1988, pp. 161–78.

⁶ Regina Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain: The Violent Legacy of Monotheism*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1997, p. 6.

⁷ Sacvan Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad*, University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, 1978, p. 47.

⁸ Deborah Bird Rose, 'Rupture and the ethics of care in colonised space', in Tim Bonyhady and Tom Griffiths

(eds), *Prehistory to Politics: John Mulvaney, the Humanities and the Public Intellectual*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1996, pp. 200, 205.

9 John Hirst, 'The pioneer legend', *Australian Historical Studies*, vol. 18, no. 71, 1978, pp. 316–37.

10 *Ibid.*, p. 337.

11 Margaret Atwood, *Strange Things: The Malevolent North in Canadian Literature*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1995, p. 19.

12 JW Gregory, *The Dead Heart of Australia*, John Murray, London, 1906, p. 159.

13 Alan Moorehead, *Cooper's Creek*, Hamish Hamilton, London, 1962, p. 200.

14 Peter Otto, 'Forgetting colonialism', *Meanjin*, vol. 52, no. 3, 1993, pp. 545–8.

15 Frantz Fanon, 'Concerning violence', in Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1973, pp. 39–40.

16 Galarrwuy Yunupingu, Speech to the National Press Club, Canberra, 13 February 1997.

17 Cited by Bain Attwood, 'The past as future: Aborigines, Australia and the (dis)course of history', in Attwood (ed.), *In the Age of Mabo: History, Aborigines and Australia*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1996, p. xii.

18 Max Crawford, *Australia*, Hutchinson, London, 1952, had a brief chapter on Aboriginal life before the arrival of the Europeans, and of the later history noted only that the relations between squatters and Aborigines had been little studied. Gordon Greenwood (ed.), *Australia: A Social and Political History*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1955, had virtually nothing; while AGL Shaw,

The Story of Australia, Faber, London, 1955, had little more, and articulated the increasingly common view that there was no serious resistance from 'the aborigines with their primitive culture'. In the next decade, Douglas Pike, *Australia: The Quiet Continent*, Cambridge University Press, London, 1962, spoke on its first page of a 'native people in stone-age bondage' and little else. Marjorie Barnard, *A History of Australia*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1962, Manning Clark, *A Short History of Australia*, Heinemann, London, 1963, and Russel Ward, *Australia*, Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, 1965, all contained little more than a few scattered references. Even in the 1970s, Frank Crowley's widely used university textbook, *A New History of Australia*, Heinemann, Melbourne, 1974, omitted Aboriginal history entirely.

19 Raphaël Lemkin, *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe: Law of Occupation, Analysis of Government Proposals for Redress*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1944, p. 79.

20 United Nations, *Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide*, Article II, United Nations, 9 December 1948.

21 Ward Churchill, *A Little Matter of Genocide: Holocaust and Denial in the Americas 1492 to the Present*, City Lights Books, San Francisco, 1997, pp. 1, 84–8, 97, 129, 403.

22 Sven Lindqvist, *'Exterminate all the Brutes': One Man's Odyssey into the Heart of Darkness and the Origins of European Genocide*, The New Press, New York, 1997, pp. 122–41.

23 Wendy Brown, *States of Injury: Power to Freedom in Late Modernity*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1995, p. 66.

Graeme Davison

Conflict in the museum

National museums are now among the hot spots in a historic settling of accounts between indigenous people and European settler societies. Not only in Australia, but in South Africa, the United States, Canada, New Zealand and in Europe itself, where the formerly colonised have migrated to the metropolis, the material legacy of colonisation, exemplified by the collections of the great museums, has become a bone of contention. In the 1970s and 1980s, these disputes centred on the return of objects acquired through colonisation. Now the debate has shifted to how those objects are displayed and interpreted.

Since the nineteenth century, Benedict Anderson has argued, the museum has been a key site in the process of nation building.¹ At the end of the twentieth century, the museum remains a major educational and leisure industry as well as a focus for national pride and identity. The national museum is where the nation is publicly on show, both to locals and increasing numbers of international visitors. Distance and colonial dependence have long made Australians especially nervous about the impression that they make on the rest of the world; indeed it sometimes seems as though we are incapable of validating our sense of national selfhood except through the approving eyes of others. For all these reasons, it was likely that the version of the national past presented in the National Museum of Australia would receive critical scrutiny, especially by those fearful that the national self was somehow under threat. And it was likely that its presentation of the history of the relationships between Aborigines and Europeans would be a subject of special interest.

This issue has only recently come to the boil, but it has been quietly simmering for some time. The question of relations between Europeans and Aborigines has been at the heart of the National Museum's mission since the early 1970s when Geoffrey