Reviews


FOR ALMOST 200 years Aborigines have been left out of Australian history books, just as they have been left out of the mainstream of social, economic and political life of their country. This link between historical perceptions (or lack of them) and historical processes is no coincidence. Just as Aborigines were 'discovered' by both prehistorians and historians in the 1960s, so did some state and commonwealth governments begin to appreciate that there was a group of people in Australia who had few civil rights. The breakthrough for Aborigines in Australian historiography came with research sponsored by the Social Science Research Council of Australia in the mid-1960s. The result was Charles Rowley's three seminal volumes on Aboriginal policy and practice since 1788, and a host of monographs by other writers covering many aspects of contemporary Aboriginal life. These publications spawned a new academic sub-industry in the 1970s which produced a flood of theses, articles, collected documents, monographs, audiovisual paraphernalia, and a new journal. Aborigines were discovered with a vengeance by academics. While this material added much to Rowley's overview it did so quantitatively rather than qualitatively.

Rowley's three volumes, in particular his Destruction of Aboriginal Society, are in my view still the most perceptive contributions to Aboriginal history. Yet they and the mass of material which followed through the 1970s essentially examined what Europeans had done to Aborigines and the horrific consequences for Aborigines. In this context Aborigines were usually portrayed (often implicitly) as relatively passive, reeling tragically and helplessly before the onslaught of European colonization. The work of Henry Reynolds represents a first qualitative advance on Rowley's groundwork. Instead of examining Aboriginal-European relations via the medium of European policies, Reynolds attempts to cross to the 'other side of the frontier' to see how and why Aborigines reacted as they did. He thus opens up a new dimension in Aboriginal history, one which has important ramifications for Australian history generally.

In the chapters examining Aborigines and European exploration, continuity and change in Aboriginal society, the nature of Aboriginal resistance to colonization and the Aboriginal politics of contact, Reynolds tilts head-on at widely held assumptions. Aborigines were not, he argues, 'incurious' people, they were often aware of the European frontier years before it arrived, they were capable of adopting new material culture, new ideas, and implementing new strategies in contact situations. Reynolds demonstrates how Aborigines in some localities were able to oppose the onrush of European settlement far more effectively than historians have assumed (some 2,000-2,500 Europeans killed overall) as well as to come to terms with European presence in less violent ways. Reynolds also highlights the
importance of not stereotyping the frontier itself. He illustrates important differences and similarities in a range of situations—sheep and cattle farming, pearling and *bèche-de-mer* fishing, sealing and whaling, timber cutting and mining.

Reynolds’s account of various aboriginal strategies for survival ranging from the violent to the more subtle forms of accommodation indicate that many Aboriginal communities were far from the weak, pathetic, ignorant, helpless creatures so often portrayed in the books.

Yet this argument can be pushed only so far: even if Aborigines were more active and adaptable than usually assumed, sooner or later, as Reynolds admits, most of their communities suffered from massive depopulation through killings and disease, cultural dislocation and dispossession.

Reynolds immodestly though perhaps not inaccurately claims that if his conclusions are accepted ‘all previous accounts of early interaction between Europeans and Aborigines must be drastically modified’.

It is clear, now, that the boundaries of Australian historiography can be pushed back to encompass the other side of the frontier. Stretches of difficult country remain but they will become increasingly accessible to our scholarship. The barriers which for so long kept Aboriginal experience out of our history books were not principally those of source material or methodology but rather ones of perception and preference. Much of the material used in this book has been available to scholars for a century and more. But black cries of anger and anguish were out of place in works that celebrated national achievement or catalogued peaceful progress in a quiet continent, while deft scholarly feet avoided the embarrassment of bloodied billabongs.

But how will Aborigines fit into future interpretations of Australia’s past since 1788, especially the 20,000 killed directly by Europeans before 1901?

How, then, do we deal with the Aboriginal dead? White Australians frequently say that ‘all that’ should be forgotten. But it won’t be. Black memories are too deeply, too recently scarred. And forgetfulness is a strange prescription coming from a community which reveres the fallen warrior and emblazons the phrase ‘Lest We Forget’ on monuments throughout the land . . . . There is much in their story which Australians have traditionally admired. They were classical underdogs; were always outgunned, yet often faced death without flinching. If they did not die for Australia as such they fell defending their homelands, their sacred sites, their way of life. What is more the blacks bled on their own soil and not half a world away furthering the strategic objectives of a distant Motherland whose influence must increasingly be seen as of transient importance in the history of the continent. Mother England has gone—the Empire too—yet black and white Australians have still to come to terms . . . . If we are unable to embrace the other side of the frontier as part of our own heritage we will stand in the eyes of the world as a people still chained intellectually and emotionally to our nineteenth-century Anglo-Saxon origins, ever the transplanted Britishers.

In the context of Australian historiography, Reynolds’ book is a hard hitting and most disturbing contribution. And it is all the more pertinent since such revisionism is long overdue. Historians of culture contact in Africa, the Americas, New Zealand and the Pacific Islands have been looking at ‘the other side’ for twenty to thirty years now, and many of the issues Reynolds examines are *déjà vu* in any context other than Australian history.

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