

Interlude 2

I first read Katherine Susannah Prichard's *Coonardoo* in 1961, and was much affected by it. I first read Sally Morgan's *My Place* in 2007, because I thought it might make a companion for, or provide a comparison with, its predecessor. It did! I was surprised by the way the two books spoke to each other. I read *My Place* slowly, trying to find its themes, then returned to *Coonardoo*, only to find, as often happens, that either the book or its reader had changed. In my first reading, years ago, I had felt a great sorrow for *Coonardoo*, had admired Prichard's handling of a harsh region of the country which I had never seen, but failed to notice many things about the story line which are obvious to me now. It is this later reading which informs my essay.

My Place, too, was a different book after I had re-read *Coonardoo*. It seemed possible, after reading Sally Morgan's account of retracing her family's past in the Pilbara, especially on Corunna Downs, to feel almost nostalgic for the situation where whites and blacks lived side by side, as they did, too, on Prichard's Wyaliba station. The white invasion, profoundly as it had disrupted aboriginal society, had gone only so far. The black people, grievously disrupted as they had been, still preserved many of their ways, largely because they were still on or near their own land. Their place.

There are still places in Australia today where whites and blacks – and the mixtures, the inevitable combinations of some of both – coexist within recall, as it were, of their earlier, pre-contact

selves. Fascinating as such places may be, they provide little guidance for the urban aborigines – or the urban whites – of today. The tense, two-way struggle goes on. One has only to pick up a newspaper to read that someone is declaring that black people need jobs! They need to enter the real economy!

Perhaps. Proclamations of this sort are no more than restatements of the battle cries of conquest, of invasion, long ago. Our aborigines never had jobs; they were busy enough, at times, but they had more *leisure* than the invading whites, which they devoted to a vast range of activities, all of them meaningful in their systems of thought and sociability. Their achievement was one of harmony which we not only don't possess but don't strive to attain. The two ways of life are as far apart as ever. How far apart, how close, and how interlocked, can best be understood by looking at accounts such as the two books under discussion here can provide. It may be depressing, but it's the best we can do.