a short history of AustraliA

Chester Eagle

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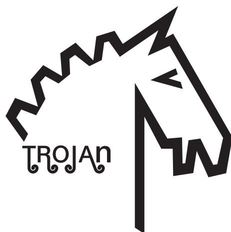

A Short History of Australia is published by Chester Eagle, 23 Langs Road, Ivanhoe 3079 Australia, operating as Trojan Press. Phone is 61 3 9497 1018 and email address is cae@netspace.net.au

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DTP by Karen Wilson. First published electronically in 2014. Print edition of 200 copies by Chris Giacomi, Design To Print, Somerville 3912 Victoria. Trojan Press wishes to acknowledge that the cover photo was taken by Allan Scott and used in *Papunya: The Beginnings of the Western Desert Painting Movement* by Geoffrey Bardon and James Bardon, The Miegunyah Press, Melbourne 2004.

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A Short History of Australia (a reflection, 2014)

Australia's story starts so far back we can't see its beginnings. The land mass was once joined to Africa and South America; there are commonalities between the life forms of what are now three continents, so, does this mean that the Pacific Islands and places like Madagascar should be included? Answer, they could be, but we prefer the idea of an island continent, sufficient unto itself and cut off from the rest of the world for millennia. It's a country that has plenty of space and making this separation gives time a starting point which is necessary if it's to do its work!

There are traces here and there of huge animals and birds that disputed ownership of the land with the first Australians, people about whom little is known, despite the remarkable nature of our aborigines' belief systems and stories, in which the dreaming, the origins, are ever-present even today, meaning that our history is by no means linear, although it must be said that whitefellas who understand how the blackfellas understand are few and far between. This makes for a mysterious and possibly enchanting gap in the comprehension of Australia. The European mind is sure enough about what it sees, but the ancient culture was just as sure, and it lingers, causing those who believe the ideas that have since become global to be cautious in the way they apply them to Australia. The name means 'south land' but for the black people it wasn't south of anywhere, it was central, something modern Australians find hard to internalise. We are inclined to think that important happenings take place elsewhere, like the wars our soldiers have travelled far to experience.

They went away, and still do, rather than submit to the terms, the demands, of an ever-changing, endlessly connected land. The land is the central reality of our history, rather than the human activities taking place on its surface. The black people accepted this for all those thousands of years, while the European invaders – arrivals, if you wish – have managed the land in a European way, fencing it with straight lines which are mostly functional but rise on occasions to comic heights, such as Western Australia's famous 'rabbit-proof' fence. (Rabbits are determined little creatures and it's almost impossible to restrain them.) Black people accepted responsibilities for land, providing at least some link to white farmers who also accept the burden of looking after what they 'own' only temporarily. Urban people, on the other hand, see land as a form of capital, capable of being bought and sold, and used for producing a range of crops depending on the markets of the time. It is generally accepted that the black inhabitants had no concept of money and defined value in ways unknown to those who took their land off them.

Value, like beauty, is a human concept, and the Australian landscape demands that we consider it in pre-human terms as well as those in use today. Travellers to the centre of the country may find signs telling them that the MacDonnell Ranges have been worn down from Himalayan heights; incredible as this may seem, there are certainly low strands of rock that appear to have once been part of something more substantial. Early white settlers called such areas 'desert',

meaning that they were unable to sustain human life, but they did so for long stretches of aboriginal time, during which the plant life of the country evolved, affected in its evolution, we must assume, by the black people's use of fire. Many of the country's plants, notably the genus eucalyptus, have become adapted to regularly enduring fire, and recent writers Bill Gammage (1) and Bruce Pascoe (2) have pointed out that the landscape and plant cover we know so well was a creation of the original people.

This is a remarkable concept, and forces us to reconsider our notions of history because it upsets our belief that humans are a developing species, endlessly moving upwards on an evolutionary ladder. The aboriginal people, devastated by the incursions of better-armed and psychologically more savage Europeans, found their world-view collapsing about them, but many of them have never quite given in and at the time of my writing are making a comeback, forcing a reconsideration of the ideas and living habits which arrived in 1788 and have never stopped flowing in since then. The history of our land is contestable, intrinsically unstable, and, as any set of ideas should be, no more than a work (of understanding) in progress.

In a sense this is also true of the landscape itself, which, strange as it may seem, I never saw clearly until I returned from my first visit to Europe where almost everything has been transformed by the hand of man. European influence has certainly been most pervasive in this country, with towns dotted everywhere, connected by road, rail, fences,

irrigation channels and cultivated paddocks, but one has only to see a neglected farm to know the recuperative powers of the bush. The least falling away of human energy and the bush is back, with bracken fern leading the way, followed by wattles and a little later, gum suckers as what we might call the senior forest reasserts itself.

This recapture of land by bush undermines our European understandings and forces us to ask what is the best way to 'see' the landscape, and perhaps the best way to do this is from the air because it is from this vantage point that the movement of water is outlined for us by lines of trees, which get smaller and more scattered as the water goes further underground and out of the reach of roots. Interestingly, many people have commented on the way that aboriginal painting frequently renders the land as if seen, even mapped, from above. The next step is to ask, of any part of the landscape, what growth it produces and what movement of creatures takes place on or above its surfaces. Asking these questions leads to the realisation that the earth can be very eloquent about itself via the plants that flourish in, survive, or avoid any particular area. It seems to be no accident that the processes of wind, fire, and soil determine the character of what will and won't grow well, to the extent that we can characterise a piece of country by what grows there – redgum country, box/ironbark country, mountain ash forest, or – perhaps my favourite because it's where my family farmed for generations – redgum and black box country. Et cetera, from the bottom of Tasmania to the tropical tips of

our north. The ultimate giver of life is of course water, and one of the turning points in our country's history was the realisation by white settlers that there *was* an inland sea, except that its very considerable tracts of water were not on the surface but stored beneath and extractable by drilling wells and installing pumps powered by engines or simply windmills. The movement across the land by the aboriginal people and indeed their understanding of it was linked to those places where water came near the surface and was thus accessible for drinking.

So what have we done to the land?

The answer to that question is a vast list of changes, mostly to do with making it more European. Forests have been ringbarked and huge areas cleared. Homes and homesteads have been built while aboriginal housing has been destroyed and its very existence denied. The earth itself has been hardened by the hooves of imported animals, while sheep and cultivation have destroyed the native grasses. Towns have been built in places subject to flood. Black people have been marginalised in the country that was once theirs, and their languages are for the most part forgotten. Roads, railway lines and airports link places with a ruthlessness lacking the poetry of songlines. An equal degree of ignorance has been applied to the placement of various crops, with rice, for instance, soaking up vast quantities of Murray-Darling water for a crop better suited to the tropics. Species have been chopped out but not replaced, always an indication of unfettered business activity without pause for rest and recovery. Control of the landscape, carefully maintained by

the black people, has been loosened so that despite vast areas of clearing the number of trees on the continent may even have increased, though few people would be in a position to say if this was so or not. Uranium has been disturbed and hillocks of rock and earth created by mining. This adds up to a pretty dismal list except that the doing of it has somehow led to the general population developing a considerable love and respect for the native birds, animals, grasses, trees and flowers. Each wave of migration has brought new settlers whose ways are inclined to disrupt the harmony that once existed in Australian nature and yet, overall, Australians have become more caring about indigenous creatures and eco-systems than they have ever been since white settlement in 1788.

This leads me to say that the history of Australia is not so much a matter of an earlier, 'primitive' civilisation being replaced by an offshoot of European, now global, civilisation, but rather a fascinating interchange between an earlier and a later way of life, each affecting the other. Most consideration, thus far, has been given to the collapse of the first and the ups and downs of the second, but I propose to take another path in my account, short as it is going to be.

My history of Australia is a history of the land, who owns it, and how it has been used and understood. Let us go back to 1788 because that was the moment when the two civilisations, the ancient one and the European one that largely replaced it, were more or less evenly poised, the new arrivals aware of their ignorance though hardly willing to concede the knowledge of those they were encountering. The

whites were aware of some of the blackfellas' skills, because they were made apparent by their own incapacities. The blacks seemed always to know where they were, while the newcomers got lost in the bush. (Escaped convicts thought they might reach China!) They lived on fish, kangaroos and other things, so how did they know where to find them? They cried when they saw convicts whipped, but didn't they have cruelties of their own? They moved about a lot and one could never be sure when they would appear and disappear. Where were they when they were out of sight, and what mischief were they up to? One thing the whites knew they were good at was tracking. The tiniest, the faintest of signs were messages to them, so that they were called on whenever one of the settlers went missing; if that was their principal virtue, their greatest defect was their disrespect for property. They knew that sheep and cattle provided meat and saw no reason why they shouldn't be speared when needed. This greatly angered the whites, of course, but it made apparent one of the major differences between the two ways of living. The blacks not only refused to live by whitefella rules, they had other, incomprehensible ones of their own and dialogue appeared to be all but impossible.

We need now to look around at some of these differences between the two races. Let me begin in the earliest days of my schooling. One of our teachers told us that the aborigines knew that they mustn't extinguish the species they fed on. If there were fish in a pond, she told us, the blacks only ate a few of them, so there were more next time they came back.

Or, she said, and she was being rather pointed, I suspect, if they came across a nest they took only some of the eggs, because, if humans had to eat, birds had to be kept alive also. She was reproving her class because she knew that boys went birdnesting, as it was called, and that some of them, having found an undefended nest, would throw the eggs to the ground below, ending the life inside before it had properly begun. I didn't do this myself but I knew I was attached in some way to those who did. No barrier rose up in our minds to stop us doing this. In matters of faith we had other concerns.

What were they? This is a most difficult question. I spoke before about central Australia's remnants of mountains long eroded. The equivalent in the realms of faith, values and morals, were the little churches that pioneering communities built in their early settlements. Big churches, even cathedrals, might be erected in the coastal cities, but on the perimeters of settlement, the frontier as historians like to call it, little weatherboard shacks might be as far as Christianity got. Gothic grandeur might still have survived in corners, remote enough, of believers' imaginations but the physical world wouldn't reflect their faith to them unless, of course, they changed their faith, as for the most part Australian society was forced to do.

The same may be said of something even closer to home, by which word I mean the centre of a human being. Those early encounters between whites and blacks in the vicinity of Sydney led before long to the emergence on the Australian

scene of people known as half-castes. These presented an even more difficult problem than the maintenance of faith. How human were they? What could you do with them, socially? If white men preferred not to acknowledge the results of their sexuality, white women – a minority on the frontier – simply could not take on an aboriginal partner and remain in possession of any respectability, any decent social presence at all. Societies find places for their people and it was all but impossible to find a place for a person who was neither black nor fully white. Besides, who would teach them what? What identity could they pick up as they developed, and from whom? In the early generations of inter-racial children, the half-caste had little hope, because the child couldn't become a fully developed member of either race. Half-castes were a disgrace, a falling away of standards from whichever side you looked: blacks had their pride too, and could hardly nurture, develop, train and teach a youngster who was only half what s/he was supposed to be. Aboriginal identification via totems, a marker of the relationship between the human and the non-human worlds, began to break down.

It was just as bad on the settlers' side. Good people, church people, missionaries, saw in the half-caste a soul who was partly white. They couldn't be allowed to go completely native, because that was to live outside the realm that God intended for his people. God, at least, was still white. Few people in any society encompass the full range of thoughts, feelings, precepts and historical understandings which

hold the society together, but at least, if people of various occupations and of different levels of maturity and learning are in touch with each other then society can be held together. This is as true for black as it is for white, but half-castes, and then – where will it end? - quarter castes, and so on, and on, by their very existence, make it necessary for the two societies, no matter how much scorn and contempt they may feel for each other, to join because they have already joined.

The two societies, at this stage, are beginning the difficult journey of merging, of finding or creating enough common ground for their extremes to co-exist. My theme, then, is not the growth of European Australia as a part of the outside world, but the merging of aboriginal Australia with that part of the outside world that came inside and, for the better part of two centuries, believed that it had taken over completely. This was never so because the early explorers and the settlers following them judged much of the continent to be useless for their purposes, and left it for the blacks, something they did with scorn, amusement or contempt. Blackfella country, they said! This attitude went unchallenged for decades, until the settlers had acclimatised themselves sufficiently to find remote Australia attractive; the European way of seeing took a long time to be replaced.

That was because the two ways of life, of thinking and celebrating one's existence, were about as far apart as could be. Strangely enough, these differences were broken down on a number of occasions, the one best remembered today being the case of William Buckley who absented himself

from the first attempt to make an official settlement in Victoria near Port Phillip heads in 1803, and eventually re-presented himself to the civilisation he'd abandoned in 1835: thirty years with the blacks! This second settlement was far more ruthless and determined than the first and Buckley found it very hard to reconcile himself to his new position as go-between, largely because he'd adapted only too well to the native life and lost his sympathies for what the newcomers were about. Had those Port Phillip settlers in the years following 1835 been so inclined, they might have found Buckley a considerable resource, but they were more inclined to think of him as a somewhat dehumanised curiosity. Early Australian settlers were by no means inclined to discover the humanity, and the methods, of those they were replacing, hence their failure to profit from others who did what Buckley had done in places such as the north Queensland coast. (See *Seventeen Years Wandering Among the Aboriginals* by James Morrill (3), first published 1864.). One suspects that there may have been other white men in various parts of the continent who 'went native' but their lives and experiences have never been examined as contributing to the understanding of the two civilisations. (For a fictional examination of this theme we can turn to Patrick White's *A Fringe of Leaves*, Jonathon Cape, London, 1976, where the central character's stay in the wilderness is shown as a deepening and profoundly necessary experience.)

The European invaders, having found the continent to their liking, had no intention of leaving, and as for the

original inhabitants, where else would they feel at home after forty-plus thousand years? The two sides had no alternative but to find a modus vivendi, and the strange thing is that it has developed where once it was thought impossible, namely in the mixed blood people, once outcasts, who, it was believed on both sides of the divide, could never understand, and certainly not *embody*, either side well enough to represent it to the other. This feeling, that a dialogue is impossible, is still alive today, if declining in influence. The present writer remembers taking part in the development of a new history curriculum for the state of Victoria in 1986; it was felt that perhaps the aboriginal story should be represented by a special unit of study and local Kooris were approached to see if they wished to participate. They didn't. They assumed that whitefellas would write it and their only contribution was aggressive: 'Make sure you tell it like it was!'

But how was it? In a sense, everyone knows, but no formalisation of the shared experience of blacks and whites has been developed. It may be necessary, as many would admit, but trying to reach agreement is difficult and it suits both sides, perhaps, not to try too hard to reach a settlement. This account that I've undertaken is an attempt to open up some areas of agreement, or at least recognition, so that work on a real history can begin.

Such a history would deal with the two parties in the long period prior to contact; would linger on the early years at Sydney Cove; would extend to the similar – or dissimilar, perhaps? – encounters elsewhere around the

country; and would deal, over time, with the legal and constitutional framework which the invaders imposed. We are speaking, here, of the colonists' refusal to grant rights, or even legal existence, to the earlier people, leading to the amazing notion of *terra nullius* which placed control of the land within the jurisdiction of British, and later Australian, law. A triumph indeed! Aboriginal people only achieved citizenship of the Commonwealth at a referendum in 1967, one of the few occasions when a referendum vote has caused the constitution to be altered. By then, some of their menfolk had fought under the British flag in South Africa and on the battlefields of France in World War 1. These were black men stepping bravely – foolishly, if you like – into the white world. This, after the early engagements of William Buckley, James Morrill and any others of their ilk, was the normal direction of any contact. It was generally agreed in the white community that the blacks were dying out and that that might be the best solution to the whole wretched matter. In 1953, my second year at Melbourne University, well-intentioned spirits on the Students Representative Council began raising money to fund an aboriginal scholarship. Not much was raised before it was realised that there were no aboriginal students in any Victorian school at a higher level than year 10, two years from university entrance level. The idea died.

Oddly enough, this moment of failure could be said to prefigure the changes which have led to the current renaissance of the original people. Causes for the resurgence

are hard to pin down, but the effects are clearly visible if we look at Australian Rules football, the nation's most popular sport. As a schoolboy, I was pleased, indeed proud, to read that this game had its origins in a primitive – that word! – game of keepings-off conducted over two Saturdays in the year 1858 between 'teams' (mobs) of Scotch College and Melbourne Grammar boys in the same stretch of parkland where, in later years, the enormous Melbourne Cricket Ground has been developed, and where, most fittingly, the Australian Football League's grand final is held each year. As a proud Melbourne Grammar boy, I felt that this story of the game's origin was entirely appropriate. It was not until years later that I noticed that historians were starting to say that Tom Wills, by then given credit for the game's early development, had picked up the idea from watching aboriginal men and boys in Victoria's Western District playing a similar game which they called Marn Grook. In recent years numerous writers have developed this idea, giving credit for the game to Victoria's blacks. Acceptance of this explanation has gone hand in hand with the recruiting by successful clubs of considerable numbers of aboriginal players, many of them from northern Australia, where the game has caught on, or, we might say, ownership of the game has been extended to include people around Darwin and the islands to the north. Among aboriginal players, the most famous by far are those who, by some act of defiance, have shown that they refuse to accept the abuse once commonly hurled at black players by white players and crowds. The

Australian Football League, seeing which way the wind was blowing, sided with the players and condemned the abusers. (If we are looking for a contrast to this change in treatment, we can take ourselves back to the first cricketers from the antipodes to play matches in England; the year was 1868 and the players were all black. The modern tradition of Test series had yet to begin.)

Another contrast with the present position of black sportsmen can be seen by slipping back to the period when aboriginal footballers (I am thinking of Doug Nicholls, of Fitzroy, and Norm McDonald, of Essendon) were admired because uncommon. It was felt that there was something heroic about them being selected for a white team and then holding their place. Doug Nicholls, of course, was Pastor Doug Nicholls, a Christian, and Don Dunstan, the adventurous Premier of South Australia, appointed him Governor of that state. Alas, ill-health forced an early resignation, so that white Australia never really had to come to terms with Dunstan's challenge. A more recent example of aboriginal success in the whitefellas' world was the athlete Cathy Freeman, who won a gold medal at the Sydney Olympics (2000). Having crossed the line, she fell to the earth, exhausted by the burden of carrying the pride of her own people and the expectations of white Australia for so long. Black people *could* be as good as white, as she showed us, but the cost! The cost!

Moving now onto a wider scale, I wish to identify two movements in the thinking, the day-to-day experience

of European/global civilisation which have advantaged aboriginal people and allowed those of us who are not aboriginal to see them in a very different light. I refer to the environmental movement (the 'green' movement) and the realisation that the world has to be seen globally today.

The green movement, to be found in developed countries around the world, sees uninhibited capitalist 'development' as parasitical, and wasteful. Unsustainable. Indeed the word 'sustainable' is the key to virtue in the world view of the greens. Nothing should be killed, cut down or destroyed unless its replacement is on the way. Pollution should be minimised or eliminated. Societies should live within their means. Is this not what our aborigines have been doing for thousands of years? It may be that this is only capable of being achieved by small populations, in which case we must look further than granting simple praise to a simple (we think) way of life, but, as the whitefella saying goes, the runs are on the board. Black tribes lived within their means. They are, in this sense, ahead of us, not behind, teaching us rather than needing to be taught. Realisation of this development has drawn much of the sting from the abusive judgement of 'primitive' people around the world, including our own. And we *are* beginning to think of them as our own, even if this is a euphemism for 'problem' as much as the growth of a positive regard. This, too, is beginning to happen, and again it has come about in unexpected ways.

Australia has become a tourist destination, but the interest, the curiosity of our visitors is more often roused by

our outback, and the people who understand it best, than by our cities. These, admired as they may be by visitors from Asia, don't surprise our European visitors. They have as good or better where they come from. Of more interest to the visitor is what we have done with the country beyond the cities, and in satisfying this interest they rarely return to the nineteenth century respect accorded the frontier life by urban writers and artists. This is no revisiting of the drovers' way of life as celebrated by Banjo Patterson or examined by Joseph Furphy. More interesting by far is the life and thought of the aboriginal people, especially those able to express the fundamentals of their culture. Australia's standing in overseas eyes rests largely on the expressive achievements of our many artists operating in remote communities in the Northern Territory and suchlike places, most of all, perhaps, the astonishing achievements of the Papunya school of painters encouraged by Geoffrey Bardon in his brief and difficult time (1971-73) as a teacher in that troubled mixture of communities. Profoundly, deftly, and surprising even themselves, perhaps, the men of the tribes pushed together in that place, showed the world that they had ways of thinking that could not only be expressed in their painting but could amaze the world: their humanity was more, not less, than the humanity of those who looked on, and desired to own, their work. The paintings of the ever-so-short Geoffrey Bardon era won the battle and broke the bonds that whites had used to imprison and enslave them ever since 1788. The subjects of their paintings were the sustaining ideas of their people, and

the days of talented blacks like Harold Blair the tenor and Albert Namatjira the water colourist being applauded for the quality of the work they did individually in the context of whitefella norms were now numbered. Sharp lines and dramatic cross-over points are rare in human history but certain events establish themselves eventually as moments of change, when old and erroneous ways died out and new, more acceptable ways were born. The Papunya painting school didn't last long, but it happened, and nothing would or could ever be quite the same again. Readers of Alexis Wright's novels *Carpentaria* (2006) and *The Swan Book* (2013) have good reason to say the same thing. Aboriginal people have a unique way of seeing the world, it has survived the centuries of being dominated, and they are coming into their own, and to see this we must look once again at the half-, quarter-, sixteenth- and sixty-fourth castes of our population who are likely, today, to state their identity as aboriginal, even when their genetic preponderance is European. White, or perhaps we should say, white no more.

This brings us to the present time, and since I am pretending to be writing a sort of history, it is beyond, or almost beyond my scope to say how events will form themselves in the future, and yet I feel unable to end without a reference to something that happened sixty years ago when I was studying Australian History at the University of Melbourne. Our lecturer was the deeply respected Geoffrey Serle, and I remember him telling us that if we were interested to know the names of those who arrived as convicts on the

First Fleet, they could be found listed in an appendix to a certain book. Copies of this work were rare, however, and it was no use going to the State Library's copy because someone unknown had torn the appendix from its pages. We gasped, he smiled thinly. In 1953, when our lecturer told us this, there were still people who thought that a convict connection in the family was too shameful to be admitted. Twenty years later, First Fleet ancestry had become a matter of pride. I think it likely that in the not-too-distant future what was once scorned as 'a touch of the tar-brush' may also be a claim that people of mixed race will be proud to make.

That will be the first chapter in any successor to this Short History of my ever-surprising land.

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1. *The Biggest Estate on Earth: How Aborigines Made Australia*, by Bill Gammage, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 2011
2. *Dark Emu: Black Seeds – agriculture or accident?*, by Bruce Pascoe, Magabala Books, Broome, 2014
3. *Seventeen Years Wandering Among the Aboriginals*, by James Morrill, 1864, published by David M. Welch, Virginia, Northern Territory 0822 in 2006

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