

Why didn't you listen: white noise and black history

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In 1999 Henry Reynolds published *Why Weren't We Told*, his bestselling personal reflection elaborating his awakening encounter with a manifestation of Australian race relations. According to Reynolds, the encounter furthered his growing sensitivity to the fact that Australian history, or at least that which he was taught and which characterised much mid-twentieth-century historiography, omitted elucidating the history of racial conflict, let alone its extent. In fact not only narratives detailing conflict, but Aborigines themselves were mostly absent from the mid-twentieth-century national story, at least insofar as according them any agency. In his introduction Reynolds explains the book's title question was one that he had been asked over and over: 'Why were we never told? Why didn't we know?'¹

'Why weren't we told' is a peculiar question to ask. It is peculiar for a number of reasons: its exculpatory sentiment, the implied refusal to accept responsibility for ignorance, its facile rendering of complex matters, and its inaccuracy amongst much else. Nevertheless, it is perhaps for these reasons that the book has sold so well. Writing in the preface to the 2000 edition Reynolds notes that in response to its first print run '[l]etters arrived from all over the country [Australia]. One theme that came through in them again and again was that the title *Why Weren't We Told* summed up exactly what my correspondents themselves were feeling.'² Reynolds went on to say that many felt betrayed by the history they were taught in schools, and that much of the nature of settler-Aboriginal conflict had been suppressed. He positions his book as contributing to a new movement of national significance, one that:

desire[s] to face up to our history, to embrace the past in all its aspects, to cease trying to hide the violence, the dispossession, the deprivation. People now want to know the truth about the past and to come to terms with it.³

If, however, the question 'why weren't we told' is more obfuscatory than revelatory about the extent of knowledge *vis-à-vis* the nature of Aboriginal-settler conflict then it is clear that the reputed desire 'to face up to our history' comes with some constraints. The phrase 'People *now* want to know' (my emphasis) is

1 Reynolds 2000: 1.

2 Reynolds 2000: xii.

3 Reynolds 2000: xiii.

revealing, for it begs the question of why they did not want to know previously. It suggests that an appetite for the histories that many are now consuming is a recently acquired taste. This means that other questions we could and should ask might better address the 'step ... towards national maturity' that Reynolds' correspondents seek.⁴ 'Why didn't you listen' is one such question.

Reynolds mentions that in north Queensland at least many were aware of the fraught relations between settler and Aboriginal people. Beyond urban ignorance and, I will argue, confected naivety, regional and remote populations often lived in propinquity to even larger populations of Aborigines and/or Torres Strait Islanders, particularly in northern Australia. In Townsville, where this was the case, Reynolds found 'the traditions, behaviour and attitudes of the frontier era persisted and where race relations were a major cause of friction, a constant topic of discussion and debate.'⁵ He goes on to say that 'There had perhaps never been a time in North Queensland's hundred years of white history when the "Aboriginal question" had not been a matter of contention among the settlers and their Australian-born descendants.' If as Reynolds contends the 1960s-1970s settler population of Townsville were still steeped in the attitudes and debates of the frontier, then here was a significant regional population that by this very description did not need to be told about their history. They imbibed it through dint of their association with the raw and rude energies of a lingering frontier. Not there the silences awaiting the voice of history, but the noise of 'discussion and debate'.

In his 1968 ABC Boyer Lectures, anthropologist WEH Stanner titled his second address 'The Great Australian Silence'. Whilst these lectures are widely regarded as groundbreaking, the particularities of his discussion are more often overlooked than addressed. Perhaps the title of his second lecture, which conjures a more encompassing quieting than what he actually describes, bears some responsibility for this. In brief, and excluding specialist literature – that 'large array of technical papers and books expressly concerned with the aborigines' – Stanner surveyed 'a mixed lot of histories and commentaries dealing with Australian affairs in a more general way.'⁶ Even though that 'mixed lot' was surprisingly few,⁷ it is nevertheless generally representative. These texts, Stanner explained, 'seemed ... the sort of books that probably expressed well enough, and may even have helped to form, the outlook of socially conscious people between' 1939 and 1955.⁸ Absent from these arguably informative texts, informative at least for those who were 'socially conscious', is any interest in explicating Aboriginal-settler relations. This was a situation in urgent need of redress.

So it was a particular sort of literature, principally generalist Australian historiography published in the decades of the mid twentieth century, which

4 See Reynolds 2000: xiii.

5 Reynolds 2000: 29.

6 Stanner 1991: 22.

7 See Stanner 1991: 22-25.

8 Stanner 1991: 22.

Stanner was remarking on. As noted by a number of scholars, nineteenth-century historians were far less constrained than their mid-twentieth-century counterparts. Their works were inclusive of the Aboriginal presence and the resultant conflict of interests, often detailing its violent and bloody course.⁹ For several this course was not a dispassionate recording, nor mitigated through triumphalism, but cause for censure.¹⁰ And these historians had an abundance of evidentiary material. Reynolds explains that when he and Noel Loos commenced researching Queensland's settlement history they unearthed 'abundant, various and incontrovertible' evidence of frontier violence from 'official government records, the newspapers, the travellers' tales, the reminiscences.'¹¹ In respect to such evidence Queensland is unexceptional.

Nevertheless, after describing briefly the literature he had surveyed, Stanner proceeded with what has become his most widely known and cited paragraph. Besides the title of the second lecture, this paragraph must also bear some responsibility for the widespread belief that very little interest in, let alone concern, was expressed for Aborigines in any literature throughout this period and beyond, not just the general histories that Stanner had in focus.

I need not extend the list. A partial survey is enough to let me make the point that inattention on such a scale cannot possibly be explained by absent-mindedness. It is a structural matter, a view from a window which has been carefully placed to exclude a whole quadrant of the landscape. What may well have begun as a simple forgetting of other possible views turned under habit and over time into something like a cult of forgetfulness practised on a national scale. We have been able for so long to disremember the aborigines that we are now hard put to keep them in mind even when we most want to do so.¹²

Reynolds cites from this paragraph.¹³ Stanner's observations strengthened his growing 'disquiet' with 'mainstream historical writing'¹⁴ and recollections of 'general histories'¹⁵ he had encountered in schooling. The frank and abundant recounting of violence and atrocities that Reynolds was finding in nineteenth-century sources were omitted from later texts: 'Textbooks had been bowdlerised to exclude the less attractive aspects of the process of land settlement.'¹⁶ So it is that Reynolds too is able to ask of himself 'how was it that I didn't know' of this bloody history and to furnish a ready answer.¹⁷

9 See Reynolds 2000: 92; Attwood and Foster 2003: 2; Curthoys 2003: 192-193; Curthoys 2008: 241-243; Markus 1977: 170-171.

10 Reynolds 2000: 108-109.

11 Reynolds 2000: 102; see also 92, 118-119, 119-120.

12 Stanner 1991: 24-25.

13 Reynolds 2000: 91-92.

14 Reynolds 2000: 91, 104.

15 Reynolds 2000: 88.

16 Reynolds 2000: 114.

17 Reynolds 2000: 87-88, 114, 133.

Without disagreeing with Stanner's general point insofar as the specific body of literature he discusses, it is important to note that even within that field there are exceptional texts. Although a journalist and not a trained historian, Clive Turnbull's *Black War: The Extermination of the Tasmanian Aborigines* (1948) is notable. Yet the notion that this period (1930s to mid 1950s) and well beyond was devoid of meaningful mention of Aborigines persists. A 'typical white Australian upbringing' is frequently cited as sufficient explanation for one's segregation from the brute realities of settlement and its enduring legacy.¹⁸ Growing up in ignorance of the nature of Aboriginal-settler relations was a contrivance of external factors that insulated against disclosure. As Ann Curthoys says of Stanner's memorable passage:

Yet it is precisely because the metaphor is so striking that the too-simple narrative ... has taken hold. Too often it is taken to imply a kind of historiographical periodisation where there was no Aboriginal history before Stanner's own lecture and an end to the silence after it. Neither half of this statement is quite true: there is neither complete silence before 1968, nor was it completely ended afterwards. ... [S]ome historians, both inside and outside the academy, did take Aboriginal history seriously before 1968, and the 'cult of forgetfulness' of which Stanner spoke had some life in it afterwards.¹⁹

Moreover, if attention is cast beyond the body of literature that Stanner surveyed his metaphor loses much sense of its general applicability. With a singular but important exception – that being the absence of Aboriginal voices in the telling of their histories²⁰ – it becomes apparent that what he noticed was obscured from view through one particular 'window' was clearly visible through others. The significance of this cannot be understated. Whilst not discounting the importance of silences in twentieth-century historiography, those arguing ignorance of the general reality of Aboriginal history on the basis of an apparent silence are revealing very specific and limited reading practices. So abundant and varied is the material explicating settler-Aboriginal relations and its often violent course it is difficult to comprehend proclamations of naivety.

Remembering that Stanner excluded from his survey that 'large array of technical papers and books expressly concerned with the aborigines',²¹ it is apposite to note that for anyone with an interest in Aboriginal matters there was indeed a 'large array' of available material. The anthropologist AP Elkin's *The Australian Aborigines: How to Understand Them*, was first published in 1938.

18 See Maddison 2009: xxxvi-xxxvii.

19 Curthoys 2008: 247. (As noted Stanner was referring to the period between 1939 and 1955, 'by which time some objections of a serious kind were beginning to be made to the idea of assimilation.' Stanner 1991: 22. The fact that many take the date – 1968 – of Stanner's lecture as the reference point, rather than the period he was actually referring to, is further evidence of how the specificity of his argument is overlooked.

20 See Attwood 2009: 9, 262–263.

21 Stanner 1991: 22.

A second edition was published in 1943. This was reprinted in 1945 and 1948, with a third edition published in 1954.²² This is within the period of Stanner's concern (1939–55). Clearly Elkin was being read. Whilst the first edition omits frank acknowledgement of frontier atrocities, by the third edition Elkin discusses the processes of 'pacification by force', where 'organised punitive expeditions' sought 'to teach the natives a lesson – often by shooting indiscriminately'. These practices, Elkin states, continued into the 1930s.²³ Elkin also published a raft of more esoteric material between 1939 and 1955, including *Aboriginal Men of High Degree*, first published in 1945.

'Put aside' also by Stanner, on account that these texts were 'expressly concerned with the aborigines', was Paul Hasluck's *Black Australians*, first published in 1942, and Edmund Foxcroft's *Australian Native Policy: Its History Especially in Victoria* (1941). On this basis if a similar survey of general history for a 'socially conscious' readership was to be undertaken today, amongst those of many others one would need to exclude all but one or two of Reynolds' texts. Nevertheless, *Black Australians* is not so specialist so as to be alienating for the non-specialist reader. Hasluck explained his study was:

primarily an attempt to find out the attitude of white settlers to black aborigines in the early phases of contact between the two races in Western Australia and how that attitude may have affected the history of contact. Secondly, it is an attempt to find out whether that attitude was changed after the two races met and how it was changed.²⁴

From today's perspective these aims appear unsurprising, and not outside the ambit of a plethora of recent histories that attract the general reader. In *Australia's Native Policy*, Foxcroft, a political scientist at the University of Melbourne, provides a sober assessment of relevant policy that is none the less critical of its failings, and his concern for Indigenous welfare genuine.²⁵

Although published in 1930 and thus outside the period of Stanner's purview, activist Mary Bennett's *The Australian Aboriginal as a Human Being* (1930) is also notable. Arguing that Aborigines should be administered federally and not by the states, Bennett proclaims 'There is a growing number of enlightened humane Australians who feel that the present position of the Aborigines is unworthy of a great nation.'²⁶ Concerning land she was a passionate advocate of the need for its return.

On land ownership rests the title to hunt for a living. On land ownership is based the peace of the tribes. On land ownership is constructed the

²² By 1974 there had been four Australian editions and seven reprints.

²³ Elkin 1954: 322–323.

²⁴ Hasluck 1970: 9.

²⁵ Foxcroft agreed with Stanner's observation that 'Australian native policy is a curious mixture of high intention and laudable objectives; almost unbelievably mean finance; an incredibly bad local administration, and an obstinate concentration on lines of policy which 150 years of experience have made suspect.' Cited in Foxcroft 1941: 155.

²⁶ Bennett 1930: 10.

social organisation with its geometrical design of marriage laws and inheritance, with its obligations and privileges. On land ownership is founded the right to perform ceremonies for increasing the supply of animals and plants. Parted from their land the race dies as surely as an uprooted tree.²⁷

In concluding Bennett argues there 'is no excuse for our criminal indifference to the condition of the Aborigines'.²⁸ Bennett's nemesis, AO Neville, the former chief protector of Aborigines then commissioner for native affairs, published *Australia's Coloured Minority: Its Place in the Community*, in 1947. From today's perspective some of Neville's arguments are flawed, often patronising and sometimes offensive. He does, however, acknowledge Aborigines 'as the real owners of the land, its first possessors' and he is critical of how governments and individuals have responded to the Indigenous presence: 'We are all newcomers to them, dispossessors, despoilers.'²⁹

Amongst other Aboriginal-themed works the anthropologist, medico and explorer Herbert Basedow published *Knights of the Boomerang* in 1935. Expressing his concerns over Aboriginal affairs he warned that if 'Abuse, vice, pestilence and slavery [continue to be] tolerated in broad daylight' then 'we' will be committing 'racial homicide'.³⁰ The anthropologist Charles Mountford published *The Art of Albert Namatjira* in 1944, which by 1953 was up to its seventh imprint; *Brown Men and Red Sand: Journeyings in Wild Australia* in 1948; and *Life and Legends of the Aborigines* in 1951. A history inclusive of 'the life and times' of prominent Aborigines such as Albert Namatjira is one of the books Stanner was hoping to see written.³¹ Ronald and Catherine Berndt's much reprinted *The First Australians* appeared in 1952, their *Arnhem Land, Its History and Its People*, in 1954. This listing of publications with content accessible to interested general readers, not specialists alone, is neither exhaustive nor comprehensive. It is a list readily expanded several times over. It is, however, sufficient to demonstrate that through broadening the sort of books considered by Stanner, the period described by him as 'The 'Great Australian Silence' could easily be described as filled with noise.

Although now the subject of considerable criticism,³² Daisy Bates' *The Passing of the Aborigines*, first appearing in November 1938, was immediately popular. It was reprinted in December of that year, and by 1948 a further four times. Whilst Bates' account of her 'lifetime spent among the Natives' and of Aboriginal life is considerably embellished, and her depiction of Aborigines frequently offensive, the success of her book demonstrates significant public interest in Aborigines, not their slipping from consciousness. The public thirst suggests that the ground for historians was fertile if they had been

27 Bennett 1930: 15, see also 128–142.

28 Bennett 1930: 142.

29 Neville 1947: 23, see 22–23.

30 Basedow 1935: 14–15.

31 Stanner 1991: 25.

32 See Shoemaker 1989: 50–51; compare Healy 1989: 132–135.

more inclusive of Aboriginal-colonial-settler relations in their writing of the national story. Whilst it is easy to fault Bates' text on many grounds, it is not so easy to make equivalent her depiction of Aborigines and perceptions held by settler-Australians. Yet Adam Shoemaker reads the text's popularity as being indicative of settler attitudes, and of having significant influence in further shaping settler understanding of Aborigines.³³ That there was congruity on some levels between Bates' descriptions and broader sentiment does not in and of itself prove consonance between reader and text. It is unnecessary to discount the possibility of pernicious influence to admit that readers are capable of bringing unexpected responses to any literature. Apposite here, however, is the high level of demonstrable interest in Aborigines throughout the period that Stanner memorably termed 'The Great Australian Silence'.

Both more literary and middlebrow fiction and non-fiction was inclusive of Aboriginal themes throughout the period of Stanner's concern too. An awareness of Aboriginal dispossession and frontier bloodshed is acknowledged in some of this work. Bob Croll's *Wide Horizons: Wanderings in Central Australia* appeared in 1937 and was reprinted the same year. Much of this text had already been published in various newspapers and magazines following Croll's first visit to Alice Springs on the train in 1929. His interest in Aborigines is evident throughout, and this interest is the subject of the final five chapters. The concluding chapter acknowledges the bloodshed and loss of life that helped facilitate dispossession, and reminds readers that 'we owe these people for the whole of a continent.'³⁴ He describes as 'shocking' 'our treatment of the original owners of the land we now possess'.³⁵ Eleanor Dark's novel *The Timeless Land* (1943) is a sympathetic portrait of Aboriginal life and people in the Sydney region between 1770 and 1792. Republished throughout the 1940s and beyond, and still in print, the novel was well researched. It was accurately described by Healy as 'a romantic, historical work disciplined by fact, livened by curiosity, and dignified by intention.'³⁶ Amongst many other works that could be listed which are inclusive of Aborigines and related themes are Ernestine Hill's *The Territory* (1951); the former administrator of the Northern Territory, Charles Abbott's *Australia's Frontier Province* (1950); and although published earlier, Jesse Hammond's *Winjan's People: The Story of the South-West Australian Aborigines* (1933). Hill and Hammond do not refrain from accounts of atrocities and reprisal killings. Hammond reprimands that '[f]ar from calling the blacks savages, we should admit that they had more right to call the whites savages.'³⁷

A number of children's books addressing Aboriginal themes were also published throughout this period. Many evoke a sense of traditional life, often combined with descriptive accounts of varied labour on pastoral stations.

33 Shoemaker 1989: 50.

34 Croll 1937: 158.

35 Croll 1937: 147.

36 Healy 1989: 175.

37 Hammond 1933: 67.

Amongst these is Mary and Elizabeth Durack's *All-about: The Story of a Black Community on Argyle Station, Kimberley*. First published by the *Bulletin* in 1935, by 1944 it was up to its sixth impression. Rex Ingamells' *Aranda Boy: an Aboriginal Story* (1952) is also in the genre of children's books. Although often fanciful for the authors had in mind a young contemporary readership, striven for (and perhaps achieved) it is descriptive if shallow verisimilitude. For even younger readers the Durack's published *Way of the Whirlwind* in 1941 (reprinted in 1946, a second edition in 1956, and a third in 1979), and the illustrated *Piccaninnies*, also in the 1940s, for very young readers.

Adding to the crescendo disturbing Stanner's period of silence were Mary Durack's *Keep Him My Country* (1955), and a series of Ion Idriess novels, including *Over the Range* (1937), *Nemarluk: King of the Wilds* (1941), *Outlaws of the Leopolds* (1952), *The Red Chief* (1953), and *The Vanished People* (1955). Although his *Lasseter's Last Ride* was first published in 1931, it was up to its 27th edition by 1942, making it relevant to the period of Stanner's concern. *Drums of Mer* (1933) was similarly reprinted a number of times throughout this period and beyond. Of a more literary suasion, Xavier Herbert's *Capricornia* (1938), which won the Sesquicentenary Prize, dealt explicitly with issues that many refused to acknowledge, including dispossession and Aboriginal-settler sexual relations. Katharine Susannah Prichard's *Coonardoo* (1929), canvassing interracial intimacy, was also readily available. Judith Wright published poetry collections – *The Moving Image: Poems* (1946, reprinted 1953), *The Two Fires* (1955) – that included poems explicating the disquiet, guilt and sensitivities confronting settlers as they attempted to grasp the complexities of their love of the land and Aboriginal dispossession.

Already it should be evident Aborigines had not been forgotten, that many were not congregationalists in Stanner's 'cult of forgetfulness practised on a national scale',³⁸ and that there was considerable appetite for books from a range of different perspectives, styles and literary type that dealt with Aboriginal themes. Some of the readily accessible literature did not explicate dispossession, frontier violence or enduring disadvantage. Nevertheless, in its inclusion of Aborigines and related subject matter, whether historically or contemporaneously, imaginative or more factually descriptive, it assisted in perpetuating awareness of an Aboriginal presence. But much of the literature published or available in this period did discuss dispossession, frontier violence and contemporary disadvantage. It is for these reasons that Attwood and Foster note that:

All this history-making suggests that 'the great Australian silence' pertained as much to the act of listening as to that of speaking, which prompts one to speculate whether the questions recently posed by many Australians in the context of reconciliation – 'Why didn't we

38 Stanner 1991: 25.

know?’ and ‘Why were we never told?’ – should not include ‘Why didn’t we ask?’, ‘Why didn’t we listen?’ and ‘Why weren’t we able to hear.’³⁹

The fact that interest in Aborigines and their affairs reached across the arts in general further emphasises the pertinence of the above questions. Two prominent quests for a nationalist aesthetic during this period sought inspiration from Aborigines. Whilst Margaret Preston was not in any way concerned with Aboriginal affairs or welfare (in fact she was dismissive of such interests),⁴⁰ she did at least bring to popular attention the richness of Aboriginal visual arts. The Jindyworobaks too, in their clumsy desire to free Australian verse from alien influence and make it resonant with a sense of inimitable Australianness, turned to Aboriginal languages, motifs, symbols and imagined ways of perceiving the landscape.⁴¹ Both Preston and the Jindyworobaks helped promote consciousness of an Aboriginal presence to different national constituencies. Preston not only appropriated Aboriginal motifs, symbols and palette for use on an assortment of home furnishings in her quest to found a distinctive Australian aesthetic, she also assisted in organising the first exhibitions of Aboriginal art. The inaugural exhibition was held in 1929 at the National Museum of Victoria. Two later exhibitions were held in Sydney at David Jones, a major department store. Preston was an advisor for the first of these (1941), with the second in 1949 featuring art collected from Arnhem Land by the anthropologists Ronald and Catherine Berndt.⁴² With the latter exhibition attracting many viewers, Ronald Berndt thought it ‘provided the turning point in the Australian public’s attitudes towards Aboriginal art.’⁴³ Another exhibition, *Primitive Art* was held in Melbourne in 1943, and a series of Aboriginal art exhibitions were held during the 1950s. The Arrernte watercolourist Albert Namatjira was painting throughout this period too, having first exhibited in Melbourne in 1938. The critical reception of these exhibitions is beyond the specific interests of this paper. Their significance lies in the fact that there was sufficient interest in Aboriginal art to sustain successive exhibitions throughout the period of supposed silence and forgetfulness.

The performing arts were another medium through which knowledge of Aborigines was disseminated. They widened further the cultural productions dealing with and trying to make sense of the Aboriginal presence, and through which to understand the past. Not all of this work dealt with the brutality of dispossession and its enduring legacy, but it performed a significant role nevertheless in continuing to expose Aboriginal themes to different audiences. The premiere of John Antill’s ballet, *Corroboree*, was performed by the National Theatre Ballet Company in Sydney in July 1950. Rex Reid choreographed this first production, which courtesy of the Arts Council of Australia Commonwealth

39 Attwood and Foster 2003: 3. See also Attwood 2009: 1–2.

40 See Rolls 2006.

41 See Ingamells 1938; Elliott 1979.

42 See McLean 1998: 89–91.

43 Jones 1989: 175.

Jubilee Celebrations toured Melbourne, Sydney, Launceston, Hobart, Brisbane, Perth, Adelaide and Broken Hill. For the leading journalist and travel writer Colin Simpson this original production was little short of dreadful.

[I]n terms of choreography and costume design [it] was no more than a gaudy, circus-like travesty of corroboree. Through lack of understanding and plain lack of knowledge, the choreographer completely missed the spirit of the real thing, in a riot of baseless representationalism, full of incongruous and extraneous elements.⁴⁴

These comments suggest familiarity with Aboriginal cultural forms, a familiarity unexpected if 'The Great Australian Silence' was as effective as popularly understood. The later Dean and Carell production was performed for Queen Elizabeth II at the Tivoli Theatre, Sydney, in February 1954. Beth Dean, the American born ballerina and choreographer, and her husband Victor Carell, a singer and film director, conducted extensive research for this production which included months living with remote Aborigines.⁴⁵ Their book based on this experience - *Dust for the Dancers* - was published in 1955. Dean and Carell provide a romantic description of traditional Aboriginal life and of remote life in general. Despite withholding criticism of the impact of settler conquest, they nevertheless do raise the brute fact of dispossession, albeit as a passing comment.

As the European civilization rudely pushes more deeply into the tribal hunting grounds, the dark people are inevitably forced more and more urgently to come into permanent camps or reservations, where for lack of jobs under present frontier type conditions, they must rely on a benevolent government for supply.⁴⁶

Then more dramatically and indicating awareness of the nature and rapidity of change they add, 'It is an eradicable pincers movement, that is cutting the people off from their roots as surely as scissors used on a flower bud.'⁴⁷

Other artists did raise explicitly the plight of Aborigines in their work, particularly individual 'social realist' painters associated with Melbourne's Contemporary Art Society. Social issues were a concern for Yosl Bergner, a Jew who arrived in Australia in 1937 as a 17 year old. Significantly Bergner did not have to steep himself in Australian general history in order to find compassion for Aborigines, whom he identified with Jews,⁴⁸ nor understand the foundation of their disadvantage. Not for Bergner the question 'why wasn't I told' for the telling was everywhere to be witnessed.

44 Simpson 1951: 196. Colin Simpson had a leading role in revealing Australia's most renowned literary hoaxes, that of Ern Malley (see Heyward 1993: 124-127).

45 Dean and Carell 1955: 1-3.

46 Dean and Carell 1955: 111.

47 Dean and Carell 1955: 111.

48 Heinrichs 1978: 19.

For Bergner the evidence of dispossession and alienation was everywhere – in the sight of an Aboriginal ‘busker’ on a city pavement playing a popular American song on a gum leaf, as much as in Carlton tenements. In Tocumwal Bergner discovered two Aboriginal families camped on each side of the town, to which they were forbidden entry.⁴⁹

Observations such as these, which found expression in Bergner’s paintings, were there to be made by all settlers. The last painting of Bergner’s with an Aboriginal subject is *Aborigines in Chains*, 1946. The catalyst for this image was a 1946 *Herald* article.⁵⁰ Those with an interest in art had the opportunity to see several of Bergner’s Aboriginal works in a Myer Art Gallery exhibition in July 1947. Four of 14 paintings and four of ten drawings of Bergner’s, were of Aborigines.⁵¹ Noel Counihan was another of the artists associated with the Contemporary Art Society who expressed concern for the plight of Aborigines in his paintings. As with Bergner, Counihan drew inspiration from situations observable by all, in this instance an Aboriginal camp near Swan Hill, Victoria.⁵² In 1954 he also organised a letter to be sent to Paul Hasluck, the Minister for Territories, in protest over the controversial imprisonment of the respected Aboriginal watercolourist Albert Namatjira, whose plight attracted extensive media coverage.⁵³

This raises another crucial factor. A prominent feature overlooked in the exculpatory ‘Why weren’t we told’ is contemporary media coverage of Indigenous activism and of issues concerning Aboriginal welfare. The period through the 1930s to the 1950s saw increasing Aboriginal organisation and advocacy. Aborigines were pressing their demands for land, for better conditions on reserves, and less discriminatory unemployment relief, amongst other concerns. These objectives were widely reported in the media, and many settlers assisted in the cause.⁵⁴ The best known protest early in this period is the symbolic 1938 Day of Mourning, an initiative of William Cooper and others to found a platform from which to vent political demands at the sesquicentenary Australia Day celebrations.⁵⁵ The protest received wide press coverage. Typical was the *Melbourne Argus* which cited Jack Patten, one of the Aborigines’ Progressive Association leaders:

We, as aborigines, have no reason to rejoice on Australia’s 150th birthday ... This land belonged to our forefathers 150 years ago, but to-day we are being pushed farther into the background.⁵⁶

49 Haese 1988: 150, 79–80, 80–83. See also Heinrichs 1978: 19.

50 See Haese 1988: 167–168.

51 See Warren 1947.

52 See Smith 1993: 340–341.

53 Smith 1993: 325.

54 Goodall 1996: 230–246, 247–258, 261–288; Attwood 2003: 100–127.

55 See Attwood 2003: 54, 70–71.

56 *Melbourne Argus*, 27 January 1938: 2. See also *The Age*, 27 January 1938: 17; *The Mercury*, 27 January 1938: 9.

Patten was interviewed on radio beforehand where he explained 'we have no reason to rejoice. You have taken our land away from us, polluted us with disease, employed us at starvation wages, and treated many of our women dishonourably ... The only reward you offer [Aborigines] is extermination.'⁵⁷

Two prominent Aboriginal organisations were founded in this period (1930s through to the 1950s). The above mentioned Aborigines Progressive Association was founded in 1937 and the Australian Aborigines' League in 1935.⁵⁸ Newspapers and radio reported their activities, concerns and demands. Bill Ferguson of the Aborigines Progressive Association published a lengthy article in the *Daily Telegraph* on 15 October 1957. Titled 'Give Us Justice!' Ferguson wrote in part:

You can read in your history books some of the terrible things [white men] have done to us. I have heard of them from the old men.

Old Mungo told me once of the Murdering Island massacre, from which he was the only one to escape ... He told me how a squatter near Narrandera and his men drove a whole camp of blacks on to an island in the middle of the river and shot them down, women and children too, until everyone was dead.⁵⁹

The article includes mention of another massacre effected through a poisoned waterhole. In a 1941 broadcast on 2GB Sydney and 2WL Wollongong Pearl Gibbs reported 'My people have had 153 years of the white man's and white woman's cruelty and injustice and unchristian treatment imposed upon us. My race is fast vanishing.'⁶⁰ In the preface to their *The Struggle for Aboriginal Rights* Attwood and Markus comment that their 'first attempt' at short-listing 'documents for the collection yielded more than 600, mostly dated from the 1930s.'⁶¹ A short-list of greater than 600 shows how extensive the material on Aboriginal political activism is. Whilst much of this material is in the form of petitions, addresses to meetings, letters, notes and the like, a good deal also appeared in contemporary newspapers, magazines, journals and radio broadcasts.

Federal parliament was another arena where concern for Aboriginal welfare was given public venting, and not only on the floor of the house. Some of the then Minister for Territories, Paul Hasluck's speeches to parliament and to conferences, were published in 1953 in a booklet entitled *Native Welfare in Australia*. In his 18 October 1951 report to parliament on the Native Welfare Conference held in April of that year (which recommended a formal policy of assimilation be implemented), Hasluck complains about 'a good deal of misrepresentation, both inside Australia and overseas, on the subject of

57 Cited in Attwood and Markus 1999: 80-81.

58 See Attwood and Markus 1999: 58-64.

59 Cited in Attwood and Markus 1999: 78.

60 Cited in Attwood and Markus 1999: 95.

61 Attwood and Markus 1999: xx.

Australian treatment of native peoples'.⁶² Much of this 'misrepresentation' critiqued Australia's record on the human rights afforded Aborigines.⁶³ Hasluck's complaint is further evidence that for anyone with an interest in Aboriginal affairs there was no shortage of readily available information. It was just as possible during the era of Stanner's 'Great Australian Silence' as it is today to mount an evidence-based critique of Aboriginal policy and affairs.

Coverage of Aboriginal themes which included accounts of frontier violence was a staple of the popular monthly magazine *Walkabout* (1934–1972). It was published throughout the period of Stanner's 'Great Australian Silence', including during the war years. Most issues were inclusive of Aborigines in some way: through photo spreads, more typically of traditional Aborigines such as Baldwin Spencer's photographs of the 'Arunta'; and incidental mention and pictures in disparate articles on a wide assortment of topics. Also regularly included were more specialist essays written for a general audience. Amongst topics covered were: Aboriginal art; black trackers; the Torres Strait Islands and Groote Eylandt; missions; Aboriginal bird and place names; Aboriginal weapons and tools; the skills and division of labour of fishing, hunting and gathering; and sea craft. Occasionally lengthy and detailed essays on a particular subject appeared, such as Donald Thomson's 17 page 'The Story of Arnhem Land'. More romantically inspired essays along the lines of 'a day in the life of...' also featured, including contributions in this vein by Ernestine Hill.⁶⁴

Scrutarius regularly contributed thoughtful and occasionally acerbic book reviews to *Walkabout*, of which a number were concerned with Aborigines. Whilst clearly not a fan of the prolific Ion Idriess, with the review of *The Red Chief* commencing 'Notching up another facile effort' and concluding 'Anyhow, it's good, red-blooded, primitive adventure stuff',⁶⁵ Scrutarius nevertheless discerned a broadening interest in Aborigines and sensitivity towards their mistreatment in a growing number of publications. The review of Alice Duncan-Kemp's *Where Strange Paths Go Down* (1952) begins:

Nowadays, with every published variation of the aboriginal theme, one senses the national conscience tweaking at Australian history. Undoubtedly, we did treat the aboriginal badly, brutally even ... And, if to the aboriginal we are still not over-kind when and where nobody is looking, our face grows a little more red about him as the civilizing

62 Hasluck 1953: 15.

63 Hasluck 1953: 15–16.

64 Thomson 1946. For Arunta (sic) photographs see Spencer 1950. On Aboriginal art see Cotton 1940; Unknown 1944; Meredith and Longhlin 1951; Luckman 1951; McCulloch 1952; Morris 1954. On black trackers see Marshall 1943; Hood 1939. On Torres Strait Islands and Groote Eylandt see Patterson 1939a; Church 1945; Barrett 1946; Spencer 1953; Rose 1944. On missions see Mansbridge 1939; Embury 1939; Barclay 1939; Harris 1944; Gore 1951; Tuckfield 1952a, b. On Aboriginal bird and place names see Thomson 1950; Fenner 1955. On weapons and tools see Pern 1941; Fenner 1954. On fishing, hunting and gathering see Patterson 1939c, 1940; Williamson 1945. On sea craft see Patterson 1939b; Harney 1951. For a-day-in-the-life-of, see Hill 1940; Williamson 1943.

65 Scrutarius 1954: 46.

years pass, and we pour out a spate of books, as a sort of *amende*, to show that he was a jolly good blackfellow after all; and so say all of us.⁶⁶

Here is clear evidence that, at least for this reviewer, by the early 1950s there was sufficient material being published for it to constitute a body of literature demonstrating sensitivities critical of Australian history. Not for this reviewer 'Why wasn't I told', but the suggestion that too many authors were leaning too far towards apologia in their telling of settler-Aboriginal relations. Despite this, Scrutarius did not refrain from acknowledging frontier bloodshed. The review of Roland Robinson's *Legend and Dreaming* (1952) is explicit.

The more books we have of this kind, the more we shall begin to understand the original Australians whom rough, unlettered and insensitive invaders dispossessed of 'country', deprived of rights and customs, mustered like cattle and shot down in attempted escape. In such initial blots on the white man's copy book much of what Mr Robinson call the aboriginal's epic mythology became obliterated. But much remains...⁶⁷

Whilst it is easy to fault *Walkabout's* representation of Aborigines, particularly through the prism of contemporary literary criticism, more sanguine readings are not only possible but sensible. To take but one example, for every essay that reports Aborigines or their cultures as dying out, and by this is meant the then so-called full-blood Aborigines and their way of life, there is a contrary story. In an article indicatively titled 'The vanishing Australian' Mary Durack opines that Aboriginal racial and cultural assimilation into the dominant settler community is inevitable.⁶⁸ In contradiction to this ostensibly popular mid-twentieth-century understanding of the future of Aborigines, Leone Bittris reports that 'even today [1951] the natives are thriving ... their numbers are increasing each year'.⁶⁹ In a relatively lengthy essay in May 1954, John Wilson describes Aboriginal cultural revival in Australia's north-west.

While politicians haggle from the party platforms in the south, debating the future of the native race, the tribal natives are initiating a cultural revival, infiltrating the more westernized groups and the old native law is being revived with startling and significant success.⁷⁰

66 Scrutarius 1953b: 43. Alice Duncan-Kemp's childhood was spent on Mooraberrie, her family's 360 square mile cattle station in Queensland's south-west corner. *Where Strange Paths Go Down* is an elaboration of station life between 1908 and 1918. There is extensive description of Aboriginal life and related themes.

67 Scrutarius 1953a: 39.

68 Durack 1945.

69 Bittris 1951: 44.

70 Wilson 1954: 15.

In 1953 *Walkabout* was printing 32,000 copies per month, with circulation increasing.⁷¹ Aggregate circulation since the inaugural issue in November 1934 was over 5,400,000 copies.⁷² It was self funding, and its profits helped support other activities of its publisher, the Australian National Publicity Association.⁷³ *Walkabout* was being read. Its readers could not have avoided confronting an Aboriginal presence, knowing the contemporary difficulties faced by Aborigines and their impoverished condition, the often violent and bloody path to dispossession, realising that Aborigines considered themselves to be owners of the land usurped by settlers, that the long period of hostilities arose not from barbarity but from Aborigines expressing their legitimate interests, and being aware of the current disputations – official and otherwise – concerning ‘what to do’ by way of address. It was not for the readers of *Walkabout* a period of great silence on these issues. And this is the crux. Beyond that particular literature surveyed by Stanner, in the more specialist books and reports, and the more demotic narratives of history, travel, life-stories and experiences, and in the pages of magazines like *Walkabout* and in the art of the social realists like Bergner and Counihan and the poetry of Wright, all that obscured from view through the one window was on open display.

Yet for all this there were silences and silences that matter. Not only in general historiography as identified by Stanner, but the plethora of other material and information available had little impact across all levels of formal education. This endured well beyond 1955, the end of the period of Stanner’s concern. In the introduction to her recent book *Black Politics: Inside the Complexity of Aboriginal Political Culture*, Sarah Maddison recalls ‘a typical white Australian upbringing. I lived in a white, middle-class suburb and had white, middle-class friends.’ She recalls ‘grainy black and white films of semi-naked Aboriginal people hunting and gathering in the desert as the entirety of my education about the way Aboriginal people lived before Captain Cook “discovered” Australia.’ When in her twenties Maddison realised the impact of colonialism on Aborigines she became ‘distressed by my own ignorance’.⁷⁴ Notwithstanding the widely acknowledged failings of educational syllabi on these issues, this is another ‘why wasn’t I told’ explanation. Asking that question is excusatory: the apparatuses, contrivances and institutions of state bear the burden of responsibility. Someone or something else is responsible for our ignorance, for which we are ashamed but not blameworthy. As elaborated above, so

71 By March 1960 circulation was 35,106. Australian Geographical Society 1960, *Annual Report for Year ended 31st May, 1960*, Appendix A: *Walkabout* Magazine, MM550/05, Beresford Box 2 (43), Mitchell Library.

72 Australian National Publicity Association 1953, *Minutes of Board Meeting*, 26 February, Appendix A: ANPA ‘Notes for circulation at Conference of Australia and New Zealand Railways Commissioners’, February 1953, MM550/05, Beresford Box 2 (43), Mitchell Library. By way of comparison, Reynolds’ *Why Weren’t We Told*, first published in 1999, had by March 2009 sold some 40,000 copies (McKenna 2009: 14).

73 The Australian National Travel Association changed its name to the Australian National Publicity Association on 16 December 1940. It reverted to its former name in 1955. Australian National Publicity Association 1941, *Minutes of Board Meeting No. 32*, Sydney on 25th November 1940, Sydney: 3, MM550/05, Beresford Box 4 (43), Mitchell Library.

74 Maddison 2009: xxxvii.

abundant is the material crowding the period of 'The Great Australian Silence' and beyond, and so varied its nature, form and methods of transmission, that considerable information about the contemporary circumstances of Aborigines and the nature of dispossession was part of the demotic experience of living. The issue is not the lack of telling, it is the mechanisms that rendered functional a turning away from the evidence, the will to ignorance. Stanner spoke of Australians averting their gaze, and of the 'cult of forgetfulness practised on a national scale'. One cannot avert one's gaze nor practise forgetfulness if one is not cognisant of what one is witnessing. Whilst it would be easy to apportion blame, to lay the above evidence before those attributing their ignorance to an agentic failing and issue the charge of complicity, the politics of blame is rarely if ever elucidatory. Hence the need for other questions: what is it that makes one avert one's gaze? Is the aversion conscious or unconscious? How does one reconcile experience – an awareness of Aboriginal deprivation and dispossession – with a systemic refusal to seek or trace the causal trajectory? How is it that a nation practises a cult of forgetting? Is it a fundamental human flaw, an evolutionary adaptation that manifests in this way; an exigent response peculiar to particular conditions? The usual explanation that a ferment of guilt, shame, racism and settler triumphalism is responsible is inadequate for amnesias of this sort, the blind-eye to evidence, are not peculiar to settler societies, nor absent from indigenous societies.

The range of literature, creative work and media coverage from which the noise disturbing Stanner's 'silence' emanates is extensive. Work contributing to the noise is representative of the popular, learned and specialist; and high-, middle- and low-brow culture. The opportunity to be well informed existed in all categories, though as noted outside of political activism Aboriginal voices were mostly – though not entirely – absent. That this work was produced, published and broadcast, and through the number of imprints obviously read, suggests a thirst for Aboriginal themes and knowledge of Aborigines, and sensitivity to the awkwardness of the postcolonial environment. In light of this work the ubiquitous cries of 'Why weren't we told' intimate a more recent and self-interested exculpatory turn, for to admit exposure to any of the range of work discussed above is to admit awareness of the conflict between indigene and settler, and the legacy of dispossession. More straightforward it is, and far less confronting, to locate our confected ignorance in the source identified for us by Stanner, than to investigate the mechanisms and provocations that facilitate personal professions of naivety over that which is demonstrably remembered, witnessed and known. Recollections of the silences in one's schooling stand-in for the entirety of one's education, learning and experiences. As an explanation for ignorance this is at best partial. Newspaper coverage, radio broadcasts and art exhibitions (both Aboriginal and otherwise), are all deserving of more consideration for the role they played in revealing a now taken-for-granted hidden Aboriginal history. Historians and other scholars could remind themselves of the maxim that absence of evidence is not evidence of absence, and that beyond the boundaries of the general histories under Stanner's purview, including low- and middle-brow cultural productions, there is a more

forthcoming Aboriginal history, notwithstanding its flaws. Much work needs to be done to better grasp the period of Stanner's 'Great Australian Silence', for such a notion is more readily repudiated than substantiated.

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