

Frontier, Race, Nation: Henry Reynolds and Australian History

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The historian is like an actor on a revolving stage. He has a brief time in which to recite his words. He's got to hold the audience. He must also hope that he has used the time on the stage to teach and write about things that really matter ... He must ... hope that what he has seen and what he talks about will stir up a response in his audience, that they will say – and this is the only test – 'Yes, that's us'.⁽¹⁾

The words are not those of Henry Reynolds. They were spoken by another giant of Australian history, the late Manning Clark, in the mid-1980s. But as this fine collection of essays shows, they might also have been Reynolds's guiding philosophy over his long career as activist, academic, teacher, historian and public intellectual.

Another of Clark's images of the historian also came back to me as I read this book: that of the historian as prophet. Clark did not mean fortune-teller; the historian's role was not to predict the future. Rather, he understood prophets as those who addressed the great questions of their age, speaking on behalf of their generation. Perhaps the impulses to assume that mantle are stronger in post-imperial societies, where at least some historians play the role of nation-building intellectuals. Certainly, Reynolds' career as an academic and professional historian coincides almost precisely with post-imperial Australia; the era since the British turn to Europe and liquidation of empire in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Reynolds himself spent time working as a school-teacher in London in the early 1960s, and he has written memorably on his own responses to

both the class and racial fissures he experienced in that society – one so similar, yet so different also from his own native Tasmania. For instance, he recalled listening to an African man speaking at Hyde Park Corner. The man was being heckled by a group of young Australians, who told him there was no racial prejudice down under. The African knew better, ‘and launched a tirade about Australia’s treatment of the Aborigines ... He scorned the hecklers for being ignorant about their own history’.⁽²⁾ There was so little attention being paid to Australia’s violent past and unjust present at home that this native son had to travel all the way to the empire’s heart to learn about it – and from an African. Or at least that appears to be Reynolds’ implication.

The post-imperial nation-building dimension of his work has been a point lost on the political right, whose ideologues see him as having promoted national fragmentation rather than cohesion. But several of the essays in this collection suggest that Reynolds’s project might be seen as ‘an integrative nationalist endeavour’ or, more specifically, as an effort to recast certain powerful settler myths for a post-imperial Australia. In Attwood and Griffiths’ terms, Reynolds ‘extended and subverted the radical nationalist story and offered a way of embracing Aboriginal experience within familiar tropes’ (p. 50). Much of Reynolds’ work bears the marks of its origins in an essentially radical-nationalist framework of understanding.

He has made no effort to obscure this point: on the contrary, Reynolds’ personal writings – including his brief essay in this book – have made his intellectual and spiritual debts to the radical-nationalist historians of the 1940s and 1950s perfectly clear. Indeed, even if we did not have his own testimony on the matter, a cursory reading of Reynolds’s early work reveals that Russel Ward’s *The Australian Legend* (1958), in its emphasis on the formative role of the frontier in Australian history and culture, was especially influential on his thinking. Although Ward had ignored neither racism nor frontier violence, he failed to place them anywhere near the centre of his account of the origins of Australian national character. Reynolds, on the other hand, took many of the virtues Ward applied to white bushmen and transferred them to his portrayal of Aboriginal people. And having emphasised some of the least attractive features of the white bushmen’s behaviour – such as their violence towards Aboriginal people – he went on to explore their implications for our understanding of the Australian past and the politics of the present.

There was writing about Australian Aboriginal history and frontier violence well before Reynolds published his important and influential *The Other Side of the Frontier* in 1981. He did not place the subject on either the historical or political agenda. When Aboriginal protesters set up their Tent Embassy – actually a beach umbrella and some plastic sheeting – outside parliament house in Canberra on 26 January 1972, Reynolds was yet to publish anything in the field; he would release a collection of historical sources that year. At the time Labor Prime Minister Gough Whitlam dramatically handed back land at Wave Hill in the Northern Territory to the Gurindji people in 1975, symbolically pouring soil into the hands of Vincent Lingiari, Reynolds remained little known outside the northern Queensland, where he was employed as a lecturer in the local Townsville University College (later James Cook University). By the 1970s there were distinguished books beginning to appear on the history of relations between white settlers and Aborigines: Reynolds did not write any of them. As Attwood and Griffiths show, his own attempt to publish a major study was a most protracted affair that seemed, at any moment, as if it might collapse in disarray. Indeed, even at the time of the Bicentenary of British settlement in 1988, he was far from a prominent national figure – the ageing Manning Clark being far more conspicuous – although Reynolds had by then built up a substantial academic reputation on the back of three important books.

Like Clark – and it is a comparison Mark McKenna and Alan Atkinson both make in this collection – Reynolds has been a master in the art of holding an audience, and one well beyond students and his colleagues in the academy. As Attwood and Griffiths remark in their opening chapter, Reynolds ‘has changed Australian history – in both senses of that word’ (p. 3). He has been a major influence on the historiography, having played a key role in shaping a field that barely existed when he took up his first academic post in the mid-1960s – Aboriginal history. But insistent on the political and moral significance of history for the present, Reynolds has also addressed the ‘nation’ – the ‘we’ of his 1999 autobiography *Why Weren’t We Told?* – simultaneously speaking to and from the people. Atkinson calls him a ‘vernacular historian’. Yet as well as a general public, Reynolds has implicitly or explicitly addressed elites in the media, intelligentsia, politics, and the judiciary. And they have listened, if not always sympathetically – Reynolds

has been a primary target of the neo-conservative backlash associated with Australia's 'history wars' of the last decade.

One reason for this attention was that *The Law of the Land* (1987), his study of the question of Aboriginal ownership, exercised some influence over the historical understanding of the High Court judges who recognised native title in the landmark Mabo Case of 1992. As Attwood and Griffiths argue, they did not need Reynolds to support their legal reasoning, but they did need his 'story of *terra nullius*' in order to explain why previous judgments had denied Aboriginal people their property rights. Reynolds' 'morally charged' positivism was ideal for this purpose, being the kind of history judges could use (pp. 27–9).

The apparent simplicity of Reynolds' historical method has sometimes disturbed his professional fellows. He has never apparently – and appearances here are probably deceptive – been one to agonise over the epistemological and methodological problems that have animated and sometimes paralysed other historians working in the academy. But as Dipesh Chakrabarty indicates in his essay, this impression of simplicity – Reynolds' seeming distance from 'pocos', 'pomos' and the like – obscures important affinities between his work and some other key developments in modern historiography.

Reynolds' work shows every sign of having been influenced by similar concerns and impulses to subaltern histories more generally. According to Chakrabarty, Aboriginal history and Subaltern Studies were both attempts to 'democratise representations of the past' (p. 58); they were both related – if somewhat problematically – to the British new social history; and both claimed that their subjects – whether peasants, or hunters and gatherers – were capable of politics. The latter is a critical point, for it was specifically denied by the leader of the conservative history warriors, Keith Windschuttle, in his study of colonial Tasmania. On the flimsiest of grounds, he claimed that examples of resistance which historians such as Reynolds had understood as guerrilla warfare should instead be viewed as mere criminality.⁽³⁾ But whatever the failings of his historical interpretation, Windschuttle had unerringly identified one way in which Reynolds' work was indeed subversive: its celebration of Aboriginal as political actors in history.

In an era of growing self-confidence and activism among Aboriginal people, it is not surprising that, along with the white audience that is implicitly being addressed in his work, Aboriginal people have seen value in Reynolds' writings. McKenna comments that key leaders treated him as '*the* authoritative voice in indigenous history' (p. 79). In her contribution to the book, one of the younger indigenous leaders, legal academic Larissa Behrendt, recalls her father's intense interest in what kind of history was being taught in her school, and that her teacher would visit the family home to borrow his books – Reynolds' among them. Reynolds' work, she explains, 'didn't define how [her father] felt about his Aboriginality, not did it change his understanding of the history of his people, but it did resonate with what he came to learn from the older people he spent time with ... They told him their perspectives and he found that Reynolds' work acknowledged such views' (p. 292).

This collection is the result of a conference held at the National Library of Australia in Canberra in 2008. While diverse in their purpose and content, the essays are of a uniformly high quality. Several would be especially useful in university teaching of Australian history and historiography. Some, such as the long essay by the editors with which the book opens, contribute to a major assessment of Reynolds as both historian and public intellectual. There is a strong emphasis in several – especially those by Attwood and Griffiths, McKenna and Atkinson – on Reynolds' capacity to address and influence audiences outside the academy. Chakrabarty's final remarks on this very point seem especially well chosen: Reynolds must be almost unique among historians anywhere in having 'been able to produce new kinds of affect on a national scale' (p. 70).

McKenna's focus is on Reynolds as public intellectual, and the kinds of response he has evoked from members of the public. His essay concludes with Reynolds' speech – delivered in St David's Cathedral – to commemorate the bicentenary of the European settlement at Risdon Cove in Van Diemen's Land (Tasmania); a venture that resulted in the killing of local Aboriginal people. Here, the affinities with Clark – and the role of historian as prophet – could hardly be clearer. Several distinguished Australian historians –

Clark, Keith Hancock, Don Baker and Geoffrey Blainey – have been clergymen’s sons. Reynolds has shown that the historian can assume the mantle of moralist and preacher – and even apparently hold his own at the pulpit – without such a pedigree.

Other essays take up subjects and themes that have exercised Reynolds in his work. James Boyce, a Tasmanian historian himself, reflects on Reynolds as a historian of black-white relations on that island in the 19th century. It is an elegant essay that reminds us of Reynolds’s own boyhood in a place that would become notorious throughout the world for what its settlers did to Aboriginal people. Atkinson, also interested in Reynolds’ sense of place, admires his ability to keep the national and the local, other and self, intellect and feeling, simultaneously within his frame. Elizabeth Elbourne re-examines another theme that has been of immense importance in at least two of Reynolds’ works, *Law of the Land* and *This Whispering in our Hearts* (1998): the influence on colonial settlement of British humanitarian networks and beliefs. But in an elegant piece of revisionism, she draws attention to a theme that did not feature in Reynolds’ account: the role of female reformers and family connections.

Rani Kerin is also concerned with religion, humanitarianism and gender relations but, in her case, with the debates surrounding the central Australian trade in dingo scalps in the 1920s and 1930s. Kerin’s study has considerable resonance in light of recent political debates around Indigenous economic development because she shows Aboriginal people being integrated, to some extent, within the economy. Yet she also reveals that the trade led to claims that Aboriginal people were being economically and sexually exploited by the white men involved, who combined very marginal pastoral activity with the more profitable collection from Aboriginal people of dingo scalps, for which the government paid a bounty. The result was legislation to suppress the trade. But the strength of Kerin’s piece lies in her sympathetic portrayal of both sides of this cross-cultural encounter. The extent to which the behaviour of most white doggers was either cruel or exploitative is debatable, and she suspects that it was really their ‘intimate association’ with Aboriginal society that aroused opposition and official action (p. 156).

Essays by Miranda Johnson, Daniel K. Richter and Lisa Ford take up legal themes that have featured prominently in Reynolds’ *The Law of the Land* and *Aboriginal Sovereignty* (1996). In a study of the so-called Gove Case of 1971, which saw the rejection of the concept of native title, Johnson points out that Justice Blackburn permitted an important and influential innovation: the admission of hearsay evidence from Aboriginal informants. While a positive development in many respects, the terms on which such evidence was admitted – as an exception – also tended to assume the inequality between such evidence and the normal kinds of material considered by a court. It was an approach to indigenous evidence that assumed a fundamental distinction between modernity and ‘real’ Aboriginality, civility and savagery.

Richter’s examination of the ‘strange’ north American career of the concept of *terra nullius* shows that recognition native people actually both ruled and owned the land was invariably present in settler discussion; not least because such recognition was integral to what was the really the main legal game, the competition between different groups of Europeans for control of the land. The idea that Europeans, on account of their superior civilisation, ‘were entitled to bring order to a disordered landscape’ was simply taken for granted (p. 177).

Ford, the author of an excellent recent book exploring changing understandings of sovereignty in antipodean New South Wales and Georgia in North America as revealed in the interaction of the criminal law with indigenous people, summarises that argument here and relates it to Reynolds’ own work.⁽⁴⁾ Early New South Wales was characterised by a legal pluralism in which sovereignty was seen to attach to peoples more than to territory. Aboriginal people were not fully subject to British rule, and would only become so by a gradual process in the wake of a global revolution in sovereignty. In a deeply ironic judgment, she remarks that while British settlers might have expected Australia to be ‘almost empty’, they did not need it to be so in view of the limited contemporary understanding of the meaning of sovereignty (p. 194).

These essays point to a tension – within Reynolds’ work, but more obviously perhaps between Reynolds’ historical preoccupations and those of the profession in more recent times. The rise of transnational history

has had significant implications for Australian historiography in general, including the fields of indigenous and race relations history. Reynolds recently collaborated with Marilyn Lake on a book, *Drawing the Global Colour Line* (2008), that adopted a transnational approach to the issues of whiteness and racial exclusion. Lake's essay in *Frontier, Race, Nation* reflects on the aims and implications of this approach. She suggests that while such histories take us out of national comfort zones and help us to reflect on global interconnectedness, 'transnational history is not of obvious or direct use in national political warfare', failing 'to satisfy the political demand for a history that serves or contests the national heritage' (p. 346). In view of Reynolds' preoccupations as a historian, his participation in such a project would seem an odd departure. Yet Lake clarifies her argument: transnational history still carries political imperatives, notably by promoting 'an affective identification' with people seen to possess rights irrespective of their origins or nationality (p. 347). We might see this explanation as taking us back to the point of departure in Reynolds' career, for his own essay says he was inspired and informed by the race relations history of 'New Zealand, North America, South Africa and the Pacific' (pp. 377–8).

The transnational theme is also evident in Warwick Anderson's essay, which has both Australia and the Pacific in its sights. It casts serious doubt over the orthodoxy that elite and academic opinion was uniformly hostile to the race-mixing associated with the production of 'half-castes'. While some commentators in Australia and elsewhere did indeed view race-mixing with alarm, there were others such as the visiting American anthropologist Joseph Birdsell, the Australian churchman and anthropologist, A.P. Elkin, and the novelist, Xavier Herbert, who celebrated the endurance, intelligence and adaptability of 'half-castes' in Australia. They were seen to have a future in their own right, not simply to be whites-in-the-making who happened to be at an unfortunate transitional stage of development. In an unexpected contribution to the subject of intellectual traditions in Australia, Anderson points out that such ideas seem to have been especially strong in Sydney, where a traditional free trade in economic matters might have also now have been accompanied by a 'racial' free trade distinguishable from the ideas prevailing in other cities (p. 230).

Another recent historiographical trend that we find reflected and examined in essays by Lake and Tim Rowse is a subtle shift away from a history of discourse and ideas to that of emotions and practices. Lake hints at the limitations of some of Reynolds' early work's focus on ideas and the intellect – for instance the role of racial thought – to the neglect of more visceral reactions on the part of settlers to Aboriginal people. Rowse similarly points to the limitations of 'racial thought' as a basis for legislative or governmental practice in Aboriginal policy at various times and places in Australian history. For instance, in deciding who should be subject to the 'protection' of the state, legislators and administrators found racial descent to be a fairly worthless category. Being 'half-caste' provided little real indication of one's condition, needs or capacities. Rowse adds suggestively that if we wish to explain to widely acknowledged decline in racial thinking in the second half of the 20th century, its apparent uselessness as a guide to official action in the first half should not be ignored.

Russell McGregor's close study of the language of assimilation also invites scepticism about the significance of fine distinctions about ideas and terminology for actual policy behaviour. The term 'assimilation', as applied to policy and to Aboriginal people's imagined trajectory in connection with white society in the 1950s and 1960s, contained a wide range of ideas and positions. And while, as time passed, some people were concerned to distinguish (bad) 'assimilation' from (good) 'integration', a closer examination suggests little actual difference in the meaning of the two terms. Real paradigm change occurred with a more assertive Aboriginal movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s. At that point, distinctions of this kind became beside the point because neither assimilation nor integration, however defined, mattered any more.

The tone and content of the book are respectful rather than either reverential or uncritical. Several of the essays point to problems of interpretation, even occasionally errors of fact, but taken together they register the magnitude of Reynolds' achievement. The subject himself ends the book wondering if 'my work was for one season only and perhaps the weather has changed?' (p. 383). But something like this must surely be the fate of any historian whose work attracts serious notice – and especially one who also assumes the mantle of moralist, activist and prophet. It is the price of relevance. Reynolds' scholarship is fine enough to speak to

audiences, times and places well beyond those that provided its early life, urgency, and pointedness. This book is a fine tribute to that achievement.

Notes

1. Manning Clark, in R. M. Crawford, Manning Clark and Geoffrey Blainey, *Making History* (Fitzroy (Victoria), 1985), p. 66.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Henry Reynolds, *Why Weren't We Told?: A Personal Search for the Truth About Our History* (Ringwood (Victoria), 1999), p. 23.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Keith Windschuttle, *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History, Vol. 1, Van Diemen's Land 1803–1847* (Sydney, 2002), chapter three.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Lisa Ford, *Settler Sovereignty: Jurisdiction and Indigenous People in America and Australia, 1788–1836* (Cambridge, MA, 2010).[Back to \(4\)](#)

The editors of this volume wish to acknowledge this very thoughtful discussion of the book.

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