

Genocide and Settler Society: Frontier Violence and Stolen Indigenous Children in Australian History

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It is disturbing for an Australian to discover that debates about genocide often do not move very far beyond the classic area of study – Europe under the Nazis – before someone mentions the antipodes. Genocide is a crime, in other words, for which Australia is listed among the usual suspects. Ten volumes are so far projected in the series 'Studies on War and Genocide', edited by Omer Bartov, of Brown University, and of those ten, two have a general coverage, seven are on the Nazis, and one – the one under review here – is about Australia. Of course, in the two general volumes there are chapters about mass violence in other countries: the St Bartholomew's Day massacre in France, the rape of Nanking, Serbia, Croatia, Rwanda and so on. But only Australia so far merits a volume of its own.

Similarly, the fate of the Tasmanian Aborigines is often held up as an unusually thorough example of genocide – an entire people, racially and cultural distinct and confined to a single island, had virtually disappeared within three generations of invasion by the British. It does not help that the history of British settlement throughout the Australian continent is devoid of any kind of long-term and far-ranging treaty between colonisers and colonised. Elsewhere in the empire either a treaty preceded wholesale settlement (New Zealand is the obvious case), or else something like a treaty has been enacted more recently (as in Canada). Australia stands out as a country where negotiations of this kind have always been haphazard and non-committal. It is tempting then to assume that they have been shaped overall by force, and from the Indigenous point of view by the real possibility of extermination.

On the face of it, there is no good reason why the British in Australia should have been more ruthless than the British, or other European conquerors, anywhere else. It is worth asking then, whether the Australian experience deserves its notoriety. As I understand it, this is more or less the purpose of this book. So, while the editor, Dirk Moses of Sydney University, has hereby raised Australia's profile as a place clearly relevant to the issue of genocide, he has also posed the question in an open-minded way that ought to satisfy Australians genuinely interested in the history and reputation of their country.

And indeed, national feeling has to be taken very seriously in such discussion, which very deliberately

places nations in the dock. Historians have national and ethnic affiliations of their own, but even more obviously so do their readers. This is a topic that poses fundamental questions about the relationship of writer and reader, and since history speaks mainly through that relationship, it follows that books such as this one must make crucial statements about the purpose of the discipline. It might even be argued that the emergence of genocide as an area of research and publication is symptomatic of a deep methodological transformation in historical scholarship, characteristic of even larger cultural changes, with their immediate origins in the 1990s.

Books like this provide a trenchant commentary on the theoretical wanderings of historical writing during the last decades of the twentieth century. Is history fiction? Is the past real? Do any of the scholars who have asked such questions have scars on their own bodies – even little scars – as a daily reminder that history is in fact palpable? When Dr Johnson was asked how he refuted Bishop Berkeley's assertion of the unreality of material things he kicked a stone – 'I refute him thus'. Theodore Dalrymple has likewise said (in *Our Culture, What's Left of It*) that the rudderless intellectualising which he considers typical of the twentieth century might be countered in much the same way – by facing up to the fact of massive suffering and the human impact of evil. Historical scholarship seems to be undergoing a reality check of a similar kind.

This is good. It is, of course, only 'left-wing' intellectuals who are usually accused of being rudderless. But, in Australia at least, the clearest examples of intellectual nihilism are to be found among those who say – now very publicly – that the Australian colonial frontier was not particularly bloody, and that whatever violence did occur has no bearing on us now. Moses's book is a very useful contribution to this 'debate' too. It presses home the question as to how the historian should be morally evolved in his or her subject matter. Indeed, the evil under examination may be so immediate (part of one's own national history) and so extreme that moral judgement tips over into quasi-legal judgement. Genocide, of course, is a crime, defined as such by the United Nations.

It does not follow that every account of genocide is worth listening to. The chapters in this book are uneven. Their over-all arrangement is useful and important, the juxtaposition of Australian and Nazi detail being designed to raise questions in the minds of readers, with minimal guidance from the editor. There are three main sections. In the first, 'Conceptual and historical determinants', the four successive authors are mainly concerned with thinking through the meaning of the word 'genocide', within an historical context. By way of refining the process of comparison, Dirk Moses in his own chapter condemns the 'wild analogies' made by some authors in their enthusiasm to rank Australian experience with that of Nazi Europe. The truth about Australian events, he says, is horrifying, and yet more complex than such writing suggests. On the one hand, in Britain and its colonies, including the Australian ones, civil rights and human values have been highly prized. On the other, the British Empire frequently had a devastating effect on the populations that happened to be in its way. Great Britain, says Moses, 'was at once an implacable opponent of totalitarianism and a source of those settlers who swept aside millions of Indigenous peoples to establish progressive democracies in North America, New Zealand, and Australia'.

Moses draws attention to the various legitimate uses of the word 'genocide'. The sketch of an argument that follows is a fine exposition of historiographical method. It suggests, and some of the other chapters go on to prove, how skillful wrestling with a difficult word can uncover various levels of historical reality. This is in fact the main achievement of the book.

Sometimes attention wanders from this problem. In her chapter in this first part of the book Jan Kociumbas presents a broad view of Australian history that serves as introductory summary for readers unfamiliar with the area. She sees no problem with the meaning of 'genocide' and she finds genocidal purpose wherever she looks. This is not a chapter that comes fully to grips with the realities of the past. It makes genocide (undefined) an ubiquitous reality, and demands only that historians confront it. For instance, in Sydney Cove in 1789–90, very soon after the arrival of the First Fleet, large numbers of Aborigines died of smallpox. The obvious explanation is they caught it from the settlers, and some scholars have also wondered whether the disease was deliberately spread – if not by Governor Phillip (which never seemed likely) then by some subordinate official. Noel Butlin made the suggestion in 1983 and again in 1985. ⁽¹⁾ However, this is one of

those rare cases where apparently compelling circumstantial evidence simply fails to stand up to investigation. Against all the odds, it now seems fairly certain that the disease had spread from Asian contact on the far north coast of the continent (as it was to do again during the nineteenth century). (2) The timing was simply coincidence. But Kociumbas attributes such arguments to 'apologists': 'the refusal to ask the obvious question continues.' In fact, the question has been asked and provisionally answered. This chapter seems almost deliberately designed to add fuel to Australia's 'history wars', to nourish the vision, now all too common, of a light-minded 'leftish' academy, and of an historical profession incapable of telling the truth.

The chapter is worth some space here all the same, because it is so clearly at odds with the approach taken throughout most of the rest of the book. It makes just the kind of assumptions that most of the others set out to question. Thus, says Kociumbas,

It was modern technology that made possible the pace and effectiveness of the killing, and modern law that provided the judicial niceties that condoned it. This in turn enabled minimal state involvement via visible, military action.

Such statements slide around the fundamentally important issue of government responsibility. To the extent that genocide is a crime, then it is crucial to tackle two questions: did it happen in Australia and, if it did, who was responsible? Comparisons with the violence of twentieth-century Europe, for which the term 'genocide' was specifically invented, make this point central to the book.

The second part of the book takes up this challenge. Henry Reynolds examines the evidence for genocide in nineteenth-century Tasmania. He presents here a variation of the argument in his monograph, *An Indelible Stain?* (3) The central figure is George Arthur, Governor of Van Diemen's Land (modern Tasmania) from 1824 to 1836, the crucial years, and an examination of Arthur's public and private writing proves that he was desperately anxious to ensure that the island's Indigenous people survived British invasion. The settlers were another matter. 'Many', says Reynolds, '... undoubtedly were extirpationists at heart'. But this was an autocracy and the settlers did not govern. The matter is further complicated by the fact that the Aborigines themselves were by no means mere victims. In Arthur's early years, the colony was in a state of war. Invasion and genocide may be, in many cases, related events, but they are not identical. In this case, by Reynolds's logic, invasion caused war and war in turn led to something very close to the extermination of one party. Within this chain of events, genocide is a possible, but as yet an unproven link.

Of course, as Jurgen Zimmerer's chapter, the second in the book, points out, the Nazis were colonisers too, within Europe. Zimmerer draws very tightly the connection between the two processes at issue here, settlement of new peoples and extirpation of old. But still the question of strict attribution of motive remains.

In such arguments, much depends on the relationship between government and settlers. Reynolds finds this relationship personified in Alfred Stephen, Arthur's solicitor-general. Stephen was afterwards a highly regarded chief justice of New South Wales (he was keenly interested in the rights of women caught up in bad marriages). But he had limited sympathy for Aborigines in Van Diemen's Land. Arthur relied on Stephen's advice in working through his responsibilities under the law, and it seems likely (to me, at least) that it was Stephen who directed the governor's unwilling steps towards their ghastly conclusion.

Alfred Stephen was first cousin to James Stephen, Arthur's close friend and patron, and permanent under-secretary at the Colonial Office. As a family, the Stephens in Britain already represented public opinion at its most humane and learned. They also represented a central peculiarity of the nineteenth-century British Empire. A proper discussion of genocide in that period of the Empire requires the skills of a political historian, someone familiar with the fact that British governments were always more or less accountable to public opinion. It is this fact that makes comparisons with the Nazi regime especially difficult. It is also the key to the dilemma set out by Moses in his opening chapter, about the devastation caused overseas by a liberal and humane British state. As with the Stephen family in its various branches, public opinion was a

creature quite capable of behaving in radically contradictory ways.

In fact, the study of indigenous-settler relations may be a useful means of exploring this aspect of British politico-moral economy, as much as the other way around. Certainly, British genocide has yet to be examined for the way it bears on the nexus between the morality of government and the morality, or moralities, of public opinion. In the case of Germany in the 1930s and 1940s, government might be said to have acted beyond public opinion, and even, in a sense, beyond the moral instincts of its own members. Thus, the worst outrages were sometimes cloaked with double-think, even in dealings among officials. In colonial Australia, government, which was guided by leading elements within British public opinion, was a restraint on the most vicious sections of colonial public opinion, though not always an effective one.

Reynolds's chapter is followed by an account of the Queensland Native Police, by Raymond Evans. Though Queensland's notoriety is less widespread than Tasmania's, in fact few places in the nineteenth-century empire had a worse record for systematic frontier violence. Evans quotes an official in the Colonial Office, writing in 1866: 'it is by no means easy to exaggerate the recklessness with which blacks have been destroyed (in some cases by strychnine like foxes) in Queensland.' But the same individual went on to remark that there was nothing the British government could do about it. Since 1859 Queensland had been self-governing. The government there, in other words, was accountable to its own public opinion. The Native Police, an energetic frontier force for over sixty years, as Evans says, 'cut a bloody swathe through Aboriginal communities, often wiping out whole clans, especially in Central, North, and Western Queensland'. The evidence is copious, and it comes from both supporters and critics of the force.

The following chapter, by Pamela Lukin Watson, explores the impact for Queensland within a narrower focus, with an account of the virtual extermination of the Karuwali, in the south-west corner of the colony, from a variety of causes. Was there genocide in Queensland? Watson says so, on the grounds that the Karuwali were themselves a people. For the colony as a whole, Evans makes no final judgement, but his discussion of fatalities certainly gives an impression of organised ruthlessness on a lavish scale. Once again, the relationship between state and people is problematic. Evans quotes Alison Palmer's assessment, that 'the role of the Queensland Government was crucial', that it 'actively condoned the ongoing slaughter', but that its activities in this respect were 'societal-led'. On the other hand, it has been argued elsewhere that the government chose to use the Native Police in this way, at least to begin with, because the alternative was even worse. During the very first years of settlement in those parts of Australia, pastoralists had managed race relations by themselves and had demonstrated a savagery even the Native Police could not match. (4)

Throughout this book, there is insufficient acknowledgement of the fact that government, British or colonial, was not the motive force for most aspects of Australian settlement. Some authors, while posing this problem, also obscure it. Moses himself says, for instance, that colonial authorities in London 'wrung their hands about the frontier violence [in Australia] and the tribal extinctions, they were unwilling to cease or radically amend the colonization project'. But after about 1790 it was wholly impossible for anyone in London to stop or 'radically amend' the colonisation of Australia in any way that would have made much difference at all. Such statements are seriously misleading as descriptions of the way the settlement of Australia took place, and of the relationship in Britain itself between government and people.

But the problem goes beyond the peculiarities of the British. The term 'genocide' was invented to match the subtleties of government method and ambition in the 1920s and 1930s, and is therefore hard to force on nineteenth-century circumstances. The idea that the state might be personified in such a way as to make it chargeable with crimes is surely characteristic only of the last few generations. Also, as any criminal historian knows, crime takes its existence from its historical context. Perhaps it is no more useful to talk about 'genocide' as a crime for any period before World War I than it is to talk about suicide as a crime today.

On the other hand, admittedly, there has to be a point at which evil acquires a kind of universal quality, with characteristics independent of time and place. It may be that the legalistic form that discussions of genocide take, in this book as elsewhere, represent attempts to capture something for which historical context is, in the end, of limited use, a quality that defies normal rules of historical discussion. Perhaps only pseudo-legal

argument, offering timeless (because ahistorical) judgement, begins to serve the purpose. In that way, the book says something about the vast responsibilities of historical writing.

The final section of the book deals with child removal as a possible form of genocide. Once again, the question turns on the involvement of the state, during the twentieth century in this case. Robert Manne and Anna Haebich, in their separate chapters, tell of enthusiasm for the eradication of Aborigines as a distinct community, not by outright violence but by the official abduction of children and their incorporation within the ruling culture. Again, the state was complicit, but at the same time it was too half-hearted to bring about a 'final solution'.

This detail is important because the United Nations definition of genocide includes any attempt to end the existence of an entire people, by whatever means. However, it is a curious comment on the efficiency of Australian government that between 1900 and the mid-1930s, as Haebich points out, the Aboriginal population of Australia, far from being extinguished, more than doubled. Perhaps, as she also says, this is a comment too on the resilience of that remarkable people.

I have said nothing about the chapters on Nazi genocide, scattered through the book so as to allow for comparisons with Australia. The package, taken as a whole, is both disturbing and suggestive. It is a very important contribution to current debate. Australian experience does belong within any thorough discussion of genocide as an historical phenomenon, but the book also proves how careful such a discussion must be.

Notes

1. N. G. Butlin, *Our Original Aggression: Aboriginal Populations of Southeastern Australia 1788–1850* (Sydney, 1983), pp. 19–22; N. G. Butlin, 'Macassans and Aboriginal smallpox: the "1789" and "1829" epidemics', *Historical Studies*, 21 (1985), 334–5. [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Alan Frost, *Botany Bay Mirages: Illusions of Australia's Convict Beginnings* (Melbourne, 1994), pp. 190–210; Judy Campbell, *Invisible Invaders: Small-pox and Other Diseases in Aboriginal Australia, 1780–1880* (Melbourne, 2002), pp. 88–102; R. G. (Dick) Kimber, 'The dynamic century before the Horn Expedition: a speculative history', in *Exploring Central Australia: Society, the Environment and the 1894 Horn Expedition*, ed. S. R. Morton and D. J. Mulvaney (Sydney, 1996), pp. 94–5. [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Henry Reynolds, *An Indelible Stain? The Question of Genocide in Australia's History* (Melbourne, 2001). [Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Alan Atkinson, *The Europeans in Australia: A History* (2 vols., Melbourne, 1997, 2004), vol. ii, 328–32. [Back to \(4\)](#)

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