Clio or Janus?

Historians and the Stolen Generations

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In history 'central truths' that define the parameters of the stories being told are often augmented by 'smaller truths', variations on these stories which may appear to run counter to the larger truths but in the end add to, rather than undermine them. Australian historians face complex difficulties and responsibilities in addressing the truths, both large and small, of Aboriginal dispossession and the Stolen Generations.

THE BIG TRUTH about the Holocaust is that six million Jews perished during World War II at the hands of the Nazi oppressors. In the forty years since the appearance of Leon Uris' *Exodus* few historians, David Irving notwithstanding, have seriously challenged the standard account, which I am going to call here, 'the big truth'. The local variations, what we could call 'smaller truths', began a decade or more later—of heroism, of betrayals, of Germans who protected Jews, of ethnic and local and regional variations—but the parameters of the larger story have remained almost entirely unchanged. Probably now there are thousands of accounts which enlarge the central truth. They do not, though, undermine that established and central truth. Not all Jews acted in the same way. Not all Aryan Germans acted in the same way. Only the naïve or the acutely partisan would hold that any ethnic group behaves differently from the rest of humanity in a time of ultimate trauma.

In Australia, several analogous 'big truths' about Aboriginal history began to emerge, or re-emerge, towards the end of the 1970s. One concerned the violence by which the Aborigines were dispossessed: that Aboriginal people were subjected to violent dispossession of their lands. That plateau upon which subsequent Aboriginal history is premised was established, especially by historian Henry Reynolds who claimed in 1981 that the British were 'people who talked of British justice and yet unleashed a reign of terror and behaved like an ill-disciplined army of occupation once the invasion was effected'. Twenty thousand Aboriginals may have been killed in the frontier wars.[1] Over the following fifteen years the little truths were developed, the enlargements upon this central and what appeared to be well-established theme: that sometimes Aboriginal people betrayed or led neighbouring clans to their deaths, that some pastoralists protected bush people against their neighbours, that occasionally Aboriginals committed massacres of their own, and that some traditional elders of our own time blame their own ancestors for starting the trouble against the whites, that

[1]Henry Reynolds, *The Other Side of the Frontier* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1981), 164–5.

the protests by whites against the slaughter was greater and more persistent than we realised in 1980. At the same time, historians all over the country contributed evidence of frontier violence which reinforced the truth of Reynolds's position. These local qualifications, of which there were many, did not seem to disturb the central fact of dispossession-by-violence. It was right that historians—Indigenous or non-Indigenous—should allow qualifications and anomalies and differences within the larger story. Then came the attacks upon what seemed to be the plateau of the national story.[2]

During the 1980s the parameters of the large truth of the stolen generations—that large numbers of Aboriginal children were removed from their communities partly to desocialise them as Aboriginals—were also established, like the truth about Aboriginal dispossession. The following words had been spoken in 1909 by Robert Donaldson, a member of the New South Wales Legislative Assembly. Donaldson was very largely responsible for framing the policy of child removal and for writing the Annual Reports of the NSW Aborigines Protection Board. He became the Board's Chief Executive Officer in 1916 and remained in that position until 1928. There are few clearer statements of the policy and intentions of the Australian state towards Indigenous children in the continents south-east, and it is on statements such as these that the central truth has been established:

> We have today 3,200 children growing up in our midst, three-fourths of whom range from half-castes to almost white, with no prospects ahead of the great majority, under the present system, but lives of idleness and vice ... under the evil influence and bad examples of the adults they almost invariably drift into an aimless, useless life of idleness and immorality ... For adults we can only make their track as smooth as possible—they will soon pass away; but the children require our gravest consideration ... Amongst all those who have had large experience with the aborigines, and who take a deep interest in their welfare, there is no difference of opinion as to the only solution of this great problem,—the removal of the children and their complete isolation from the influence of the camps ... In the course of the next few years there will be no need for the camps and stations; the old people will have passed away, and their progeny will be absorbed in the industrial classes of the country.[3]

The central truth of separation, based on oral history, government and missionary archives and statements such as Donaldson's, were in the 1980s repeated in dozens of radio and TV presentations. Newspapers gave generous coverage to separation narratives. The National Archives of Australia exhibition 'Between Two Worlds' toured for ten years in a dozen cities before perhaps a hundred thousand people. Finally the firm establishment of the plateau of 'large truth',

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[2] The most recent example at the time of writing is Keith Windschuttle, 'The Fabrication of Australian History', *The New Criterion*, 20 September 2001, www.newcriterion.com.archive/20/sept01/keith.htm

[3] Robert Donaldson MLA addressing the Australasian Catholic Congress, 1909; quoted in Peter Read and Coral Edwards eds, *The Lost Children* (Sydney: Doubleday, 1989).

which Donaldson had put so succinctly almost a century earlier, seemed to be sealed by the enormous and favourable response to the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission report *Bringing Them Home*[4] at the Reconciliation Council Conference in May 1996. The 'big truth' seemed at last secure and accepted as part of the national story.

For fifteen years I was one of many historians helping to establish and then to maintain that central truth. We collected oral histories, we published first person accounts, we produced documentary collections, we analysed the results. These activities paralleled the publications and media appearances of the stolen generations themselves. In about 1995 I stopped. Some twenty years had passed since the first of the removed children authors—Margaret Tucker, Jimmie Barker and Charles Perkins—had begun to write of their experiences.[5] We historians, I thought, didn't need to keep enlarging the standard stolen generations narratives because they had become part of the fabric of Australian history. Indigenous publications, new material for schools, the volumes of oral testimony, the blanket media coverage and postgraduate research seemed to ensure that this historical fabric would remain whole. Surely it was time to research or write about the qualifications, the regional variations, the 'smaller truths'. I certainly decided that I would not write any more life histories about separated people in order to simply reinforce the plateau of historiographical truth—it was secure enough. I thought it was time to set into that strong, established context the stories of many people that I have known or worked with while being a member of the Link-Up[6] organisation for many years, which, while not affecting the central truth, were variations upon it. The time clearly had arrived for historians who had been working in the field to move the story along: to advise tribunals and members of parliament, to act as expert witnesses, to introduce the local variations, the anomalies, the exceptions, to demonstrate—now that the parameters are set—that no story, however morally pure, or tragic, or heroic is ever simple.

These were some of the qualifications, each drawn from the histories of people I have known or worked with: some Aboriginal parents like other people, abused their children; some Aboriginal parents, like other people, abandoned their children; some parents asked the Protection Boards to look after their children; some mothers agreed to their children's removal on the insistence of their non-Aboriginal partner; returning home to re-embrace a lost family and a new Indigenous identity is immensely difficult; removed people often became much more confident and better educated than those who remained on the missions; some adoptions by whites have been miraculously successful; some

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[4] *Bringing Them Home: National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families* (Sydney: Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997).

[5] Margaret Tucker, *If Everybody Cared: Autobiography of Margaret Tucker* (Sydney: Ure Smith, 1977); Jimmie Barker, *The Two Worlds of Jimmie Barker: The Life of an Australian Aboriginal 1900–1972*, as told to Janet Mathews (Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, 1977); Charles Perkins, *A Bastard Like Me* (Sydney: Ure Smith, 1975).

[6] Link-Up is an organisation which reunites separated Aborigines with their communities and families.

removed people abused their own children or put them into care; no-one who was removed can ever become quite the person they would have been if they had not been separated no matter how hard they try; the trauma of separation reaches sometimes into the third and fourth generation; occasionally the first visit home of the separated adult is not to a loving reunion but to an alcoholic, traumatised, violent and abusing family, quite the most horrific experience of a young person's life; occasionally mothers refuse to meet their long lost children. I was the counsellor of a man whose mother warned him that if he ever again returned to her, she would kill him. These are some of the individual experiences, some uplifting, some chilling, all infinitely complex, which in the late 1990s I was just beginning to allow into interviews, occasional writings or reviews. Only the naïve or the acutely partisan would hold that any ethnic group behaves differently from the rest of humanity in a time of ultimate trauma and despair.

But then the denials began, which took the attack upon the violent dispossession of Aboriginals a stage further.[7] While critics of Reynolds' position argued about the numbers killed, and the numbers of clashes, no one maintained that those systematic killings which were agreed to have occurred were justified. But in relation to the stolen generations, critics maintained that not only were the numbers of separated Aborigines greatly exaggerated, but that such removal of children which had taken place was justified; that policies of removal had applied to only one generation, rather than stretching across successive generations; and that the children were not stolen at all. Just at the moment when we historians should have been researching and encouraging and writing about the local variations, the smaller truths, we were forced back to defend the central position that there were indeed the stolen generations, and that perhaps fifty thousand children suffered as a consequence of national policies to desocialise them from their rightful cultural inheritance.

We need to proclaim, and demonstrate, to the doubters all over again, that larger truth: that Aboriginal mothers had a blanket thrown over their legs in childbirth to prevent them seeing their babies even once; that mothers continue to cry themselves to sleep on the anniversaries of the birth of their missing children; that the pain and blame of removal seldom dissolves between parent and child; that hardly anyone from the New South Wales Kinchela Boys Home reached the age of fifty-five; that thousands of young and adult lives were unutterably and cruelly ruined; that welfare officers, removing children solely because they were Aboriginal, intended and arranged that they should lose their Aboriginality and that they never return home; that some children were separated because their parents were regarded as troublemakers; that officials looked forward to the day when there would be no identifying Aboriginals remaining in the whole of southern Australia; and that, in the opinion of institutional or school authorities, almost all removed children were transformed, over a period

[7] Many of these denials are summarised and discussed in Peter Read, *A Rape of the Soul So Profound: The Return of the Stolen Generations* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1999), 166–87.

of eight years, from bright happy youngsters to sullen or violent subnormals. I find myself again delivering that central message about the stolen generations to regional radio audiences, in the expectations that the doubters are listening. But upon a group of young postgraduate historians I impress the variations of the smaller truths—because it is irresponsible to let aspiring historians write as if history, even very heavily weighted moral history, is simple.

We historians are much better off than public figures whose remarks, however well considered, are likely to be headline news next day. Lowitja O'Donoghue, prominent Aboriginal activist and former chair of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission, demonstrated the dangers in speaking publicly about a 'smaller', local truth instead of the 'big' narrative. She revealed that her white father, probably without her mother's knowledge, had taken her to the missionaries at Quorn, in South Australia, and asked them to care for her and her sisters. It was thirty years before she again met her grieving mother. For this admission poor O'Donoghue suffered much hostile and, I thought, undeserved criticism from other Indigenous people, but more importantly, Prime Minister John Howard immediately took advantage of the admission to argue, absurdly, that her admission somehow weakened the historical argument about and of the stolen generations. Of course historians and family members have known that this sort of thing happened many times in and out of Aboriginal society. The central planks of the stolen generations narrative were—or should have been—entirely unaffected by her admission. All that had been revealed by O'Donoghue was the diversity of Aboriginal experience at which no one should have been surprised. A much more pertinent question would be—why were the missionaries so willing to allow the permanent removal of children whom they knew to be in a comparatively secure and loving family relationship?

It's much easier for historians working to a closed gathering or an academic journal to tease out and discuss such 'small' historical variations. More complex is the publication of a book, for which one cannot control readership or dissemination. I've been working with three generations of a single family, and have been preparing a multi-autobiography, based on extended interviews. The five narratives of twenty thousand words each are of a woman who was removed in 1932, her daughter, who was also removed, and those of her three children, the first of whom was removed while the other two children stayed with her.

The narratives are extraordinary. In twenty-five years of listening to oral history, apart from stories I've recorded at massacre sites, I've never heard anything so confronting. Rape and sexual abuse of children less than ten years of age, violent crime, violent death, black magic, physical abuse, psychiatric illness, drug addiction, heroin dealing, imprisonment, juvenile delinquency, alcoholism, children neglected by their extended family, all form the narrative of an utterly dysfunctional family life. It is truly miraculous that anyone has survived this terrifying cycle which began in 1932 and cannot yet be said to have ended with the third generation of the family in 2002. It's not surprising that one family member, reading the transcription, has already withdrawn from the project and another has asked that production of the publication be halted.

It is quite possible that that these explosive and shattering linked autobiographies will never be published, because the family does not wish it. That is the right of the participants which, naturally, I respect. What is more complex is the reaction of experienced analysts of stolen generation histories with whom I have discussed the transcripts. Their reaction often has been, 'For God's sake, you can't possibly publish that, it will confirm every prejudice in the community about Aboriginal society. It will be used to demonstrate that the children should have been taken away'.

It is easy to mount a moral high horse and answer 'publish and be damned, the historical truth always is paramount'. But what the Prime Minister did to Lowitja O'Donoghue's courageous admission throws us back to the question of self-censorship. Where do our responsibilities to 'speak the truth exactly as it is' head our responsibilities to a morally responsible society? Should one write the truth, or not? Of course that is a false question, because there are many truths. But that does not help us if we ask—which truth, or which truths, do we tell? How can we tell the little truths if the big truth is so under attack that its future in the mainstream narrative is imperilled?

The transcripts follow a pattern which as a historian I wish to explore, and demonstrate. The first begins quite narrowly focussed on an Aboriginal station, then, over a period of seventy years, the family members pass from mission station to institution to country town to city to suburb. Each generation—as was, of course, Donaldson's intention—has become less Aboriginal. By the fourth generation, some of the great grandchildren of the woman removed in 1932 probably will not identify as Aboriginal. Perhaps none of them will. This is what, as the editor of the book, I would want to demonstrate. Three generations of women were given no experience in how to mother. Add alcohol and drugs and no family can achieve anything remotely conforming to a healthy or even adequate social life. The effect of the Aborigines Protection Board in forcibly removing a young girl seventy years ago has dreadfully affected her child, her grandchildren, and will continue to haunt her great-grandchildren. The ultimate legacy of Donaldson, beyond that loss of identity which he intended, is three generations almost crippled as functioning and useful human beings. I understand that—but will the readers of this set of life-stories? Will the prime minister? Is it irresponsible to publish such a collection given the propensity of critics to do what they did to Lowitja O'Donoghue's admission? I don't believe so, but it will be critical to set the stories into a historical context which will help readers to understand the misery, despair and confusion which follows separation. Maybe it is more important in the end to inform those who want to know and understand the small truths which stand beside and enlarge the large truth.

Teachers of history at secondary and tertiary level have put forward a third position. They tell me that as we are the educators, both our training and responsibility direct us to produce moral and balanced presentations. We cannot do this unless researchers provide us with all the truths, large and small, to be synthesised and shaped in teaching students. Some Aboriginal historians put a fourth position: 'it is not for you, as a white historian, to relate these negativities because

we should tell them ourselves, at a time we think is appropriate'. The Link-Up organisations, which work so closely with traumatised individuals, would perhaps respond to the issues raised by stating 'yes, these things are true, Peter, but why talk about them? Let's help our clients to achieve as much as it's possible both in terms of family relations and identity. It doesn't matter about the larger picture.'

Our clear task as historians is to advance historical knowledge and understanding, including that in areas where not much currently exists. In a second topic of research I am confronted by the problem of narrating the spiritual or psychic experiences of people not as anthropological or psychological phenomena, but in the wider terms of a profound and general truth perhaps shared by all humanity. I don't yet know how to do this. Other areas of Australian history, once more contentious, are now becoming absorbed into the accepted fabric of our past. I suppose that it is easier for younger Australians, less emotionally bonded to the Anzac legend than their grandparents, to accept that Australian soldiers sometimes fought less than heroically and on occasions killed their prisoners.

Sometimes the historians' responsibility takes the form of helping to establish the 'large truths', sometimes it is to muddy the waters of certainty or complacency. At present, it seems, historians of the stolen generations are required to do both. I think, like other historians, I'll continue to stand Janus-like at the doorway, looking both forward and back, trying to keep my eyes on our ultimate responsibility. So long as we know what it is.

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