

Black-white history: the shared responsibility of writing about colonisation's bitter legacy



Paul Daley writes about Indigenous history, Australian culture and national identity for Guardian Australia.

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As a non-fiction author dedicated to the ongoing trauma of violent colonialism, I was ineluctably drawn to confronting the same in fiction, **Paul Daley** writes

Regardless of who first reckoned that “history is written by the victors”, in the case of the true wars for the Australian continent the aphorism is proving to be ever more fanciful.

Despite all the wars and battles of resistance that raged across this continent between Aboriginal resistance fighters and the invaders’ military and militias, sovereignty was never ceded. The resistance continues. Just as the history – including how Australian society reflects it in terms of what we as a nation want to remember and celebrate – is continually being challenged and re-evaluated. This is not happening via some passive evolution. It is a direct result of strident Black activism, literature, history, all elements of artistic endeavour and journalism that reflects what really happened. It also comes from greater – but not nearly enough – white listening.

Growing up in Melbourne during the late 1970s and 80s, Australian history was laid down to me as a set of finite happenings that explained – and most of all justified – how I, from Irish-Australian stock, came to be there. There were key dates and events: 1770, 1788, 1901 and 1915. The colonies and then the nation grew “peacefully” from them all (except 1915 but that was overseas) although, if there was any gentle friction in this foundation narrative it was mostly about whether the arrival of Arthur Phillip,

the “bloodless” federation (a bit boring really; like a big Coag with beards) or Gallipoli (now there’s a yarn) was the true *moment* of national conception. Imagination played a big part in it – not surprising really given that the notion of some benign “settlement”, one whereby the Aboriginal custodians just up and left or something, was critical to the belief in the Australian story of my youth.

Melbourne – “Marvellous” Melbourne – where I grew up, was the city of the revered John Batman. I seem to remember, in Year 11 Australian History, spending an inordinate amount of class-time effectively celebrating JB’s “treaty” with the people of the Kulin nation. Fancy, the acquisition of all their land for some beads, flour, axe-heads and other shiny trinkets. No mention that the said deal this syphilitic grifter had struck was regarded by everyone as worthless. Or that the all-benevolent Batman of my history class was involved in a Tasmanian roving party to hunt down and kill Aboriginal resistance fighters.

Instructively, led by the 21st century widespread acknowledgement that he was a good deal more – or less – than Marvellous Melbourne’s folkloric hero, in 2018 Batman’s name was stripped from the federal electorate that had honoured him, appropriately replaced with that of Indigenous activist William Cooper. My children were taught about a very different Batman than I was just as my grandkids, I’m certain, will learn about a Lachlan Macquarie who was anything but the “great civiliser” celebrated by so much official Australian history, popular culture and public nomenclature. I doubt a university will still be named after him by 2050.

Today the real friction – the tension – over Australia’s foundation story is not to be found within those once seminal dates (1770, 1788, 1901, 1915) – but rather *between* them and some 60,000 to 100,000 years of Aboriginal continental habitation, and the violent dispossession and attempted annihilations of First Nations upon which the white federation was imposed.

That is the true history. National storytellers from Billy Hughes on still cling to Gallipoli as the (fallacious in my view) national moment. While this is changing, the militarism of Australian national consciousness born at Gallipoli is still reflected more broadly in popular culture. Witness the “history” shelves at any airport bookshop – books by men about men and war proliferate.

My new book *Jesustown* was conceived from my thinking, writing and discussions with many eminent Aboriginal and white historians, and other Indigenous people in this space. As an author who had dedicated considerable non-fiction to the ongoing profoundly traumatic generational legacies of violent colonialism –stolen children, social and economic disadvantage, deaths in custody, racial profiling, family memories of mass murder – I was ineluctably drawn to confronting the same in fiction.

Ultimately plot is a device – a vehicle for bigger themes. And, so, I have Patrick Renmark, a deeply flawed academic historian who has followed the money to that blokes with guns section of the airport bookshop. Circumstance dictates he must try to discern the truth about his storied grandfather, Nathaniel – “Renny” – Renmark, an adventurer and supposed “saviour” (white Australian history is replete with saviour tropes) of a fictitious Aboriginal people coalesced around the equally imagined old mission town of the title.

Did the saviour, impelled by vanity and the competitive hoarding of Aboriginal culture that defined so much ethnological research in the early and mid-20th century, ultimately sell out the people he purportedly dedicated his life to protecting? Patrick, like his “Pa”, is snared in self-justification and denial, trapped between truth, memory and “story”. He is incapable of sorting chaff from hay, bullshit from truth.

Renny’s betrayal, meanwhile, relates to the theft of Aboriginal ancestral remains, a shamefully widespread occurrence well into the 20th century, whereby bodies, mostly skeletons, of potentially tens of thousands of Indigenous people were stolen and hoarded in medical, scientific and collecting institutions in Australia and overseas. My non-fiction writing about this issue, and the autodidact and professional researchers involved in the theft heavily instructed the novel.