THE AGE

The Age's truth: Indigenous stories told by white writers

An examination of our 167-year history offers the confronting reality that The Age has failed to foster Indigenous journalists, and our coverage of the lives of Aboriginal people and the dispossession and injustices they have suffered has been poorer for that.

Michael Gawenda at his desk in 2004 during his time as editor of The Age.

By **Michael Gawenda**
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One Tuesday morning not long after I started as editor of *The Age*, the marketing manager came to see me. He had come to get his rundown of what would be in Saturday's paper, especially in Saturday Extra, which back then, in 1997, was a broadsheet magazine that sat on top of the fat classified section in newsagencies and 7-Eleven stores. Saturday was the biggest circulation day of the week.

The marketing manager spread out several pages of circulation figures and said something like: "I know this is sensitive, and you won't be happy hearing this, but articles about Aboriginal people on the front of Saturday Extra guarantees a dip in sales."

He was not suggesting that there be no articles about Indigenous people, but could they possibly be inside rather than on the front cover?

I was stunned. Was it possible that a significant number of readers of *The Age,* who were what we then called ABs – people with higher-than-average incomes and a high proportion with tertiary education – did not buy the paper if the front of Saturday Extra dealt with Indigenous issues?

The memory of that meeting came back when, 24 years later, the editor of *The Age* asked me to write an article about the paper's coverage of Indigenous issues and how that coverage had changed over the years.

I wondered whether it had always been the case that the conventional wisdom was that coverage of Indigenous Australians meant circulation falls. Was it still the case? Are there fewer hits online for stories about Indigenous people?

Without pretending to have been comprehensive in researching the newspapers going back more than 150 years, there are things that stand out.

For a start, none of the stories until quite recently – and even then only very occasionally – have been written by Aboriginal people. *The Age* has employed few Indigenous journalists. Reko Rennie, whose Indigenous heritage lies with the Kamilaroi people of northern NSW, worked for the paper from 2006 to 2009 and is now one of Australia's leading artists.

Artist Reko Rennie was one of the few Indigenous journalists to be employed by The Age. .

Perhaps there were others, but it seems clear that if that was the case, they did not refer to themselves as Indigenous, just as some of the greatest Australian rules footballers – Polly Farmer, for instance, and Barry Cable – did not proclaim the fact they were Indigenous. Most of the football reporters knew they were Indigenous but, for whatever reason, did not write about it.

Looking back, it is hard to believe that within living memory, Indigenous footballers in the main hid their heritage, although it is clear that those who didn't – Carlton's Syd Jackson is an example – suffered the racial abuse in silence. And nor did the reporters who covered the games report the abuse directed at players such as Jackson. It was not until the 1980s and 1990s when footballers such as Nicky Winmar and Michael Long called out the abuse that racism in football became a big story in *The Age*.

The Age's first Aboriginal affairs reporter was appointed in 1993. Claire Miller was not Indigenous. For the past 50 years, when coverage of Indigenous issues became more prominent in *The Age*, the journalists who dedicated themselves to reporting on Indigenous issues – either because they were asked to do so by editors or, more often, because they decided that this would be their main work – have been mainly middle-aged men.

The absence of Indigenous voices skewed the telling of the stories about the lives of Aboriginal people, of what happened to them and their communities, the injustice and dispossession they suffered, the traumas that they lived with. Because their stories were told by Europeans, Anglo Australians, the voices of Indigenous people were muffled at best and unheard at worst. It is not their stories that are told in the pages of *The Age*.

The tone and point of view of the stories is that of the journalists who wrote them. The stories illustrate the way Indigenous people were regarded by white people generally and white journalists in particular. And for a long time, indeed for more than a century, Indigenous people were a fallen people, victims, powerless, unable to cope with Western civilisation. And critically, the white men who wrote these stories in the main had no understanding of Indigenous cultures and spirituality, and of the Indigenous people's relationship to the land.

There is not the space to do any more than offer some examples of the way the paper has covered Aboriginal issues over the past 150 years or more. But they dramatically illustrate the way that Indigenous issues were reported and how that reporting changed – or didn't change – over time.

In 1886, the Victorian government's Aboriginal Protection Board moved to break up the Coranderrk Aboriginal Reserve, about 60 kilometres north-east of Melbourne, where the community of about 100 people was successfully growing and farming hops.

Women weaving baskets at Coranderrk Aboriginal Station in 1865.

The board made the move using provisions of the newly minted Aborigines Protection Bill. A community delegation walked to Melbourne to deliver a petition to the Victorian government demanding that they be allowed to stay together. The petition was ignored. The majority of residents were eventually removed. The reserve was closed in 1924.

None of this was in the report in *The Age* about the Coranderrk reserve/station published on Saturday, May 1, 1886. This was a couple of months before the Aboriginal Protection Board broke up the reserve:

"His excellency the Governor and Lady Loch on Thursday received three male aborigines from the Coranderrk station. Barak the chief, Punch and Logan, who brought a number of native weapons, baskets … and other articles which on behalf of themselves and their friends on the station, they presented to the Governor and Lady Loch. Some weeks ago, the vice regal party visited the Upper Yarra locality and on their return journey, called in at Coranderrk where they interviewed aborigines who performed various feats, such as throwing spears and boomerangs and producing fire from two sticks …"

The single-column story said the governor had expressed great interest in obtaining some native weapons, and hence the visit to Government House by Barak, Punch and Logan.

The story went on:

"The Governor and Lady Loch received the visitors very kindly and kept them at Government House for the greater part of the day. The aborigines returned home by the evening train well satisfied with the treatment they had met …"

Given that the Aboriginal residents of Coranderrk Reserve were at the time involved in a life-and-death struggle to preserve their community and their farming operation – a struggle they lost – what are we to make of this reporting? Let alone the tone of it, the characterisation of the people as primitives?

On September 22, 1886, *The Age* subsequently published a single-column story about the Aboriginal petition that had been "drawn up by adult natives at Coranderrk" and delivered to the chief secretary by "Barak and Punch, two of the oldest blacks at the station". Yes, Barak and Punch, who had been brought to Government House a few weeks before by the governor to deliver on his request for "native weapons". And according to *The Age* report, they had a great time that day.

Now here they were, just a short time later, delivering a petition to the chief secretary that started like this:

"Sir, we ask for our wishes, that is, could we get our freedom to go away shearing and harvesting, and to come home when we wish and also to go for the good of our health … We aborigines all should be free like the white population."

Is it possible that they had not raised their great concerns about the future of Coranderrk to the governor when they spent the day at Government House and left, as *The Age* put it, "well satisfied"? How did the reporter know this? He surely did not speak to Barak and Punch. The condescension is stark.

What's more, there is very little coverage of the Victorian Aborigines Protection Act (Protection Act!) under which Coranderrk reserve was dismantled. I could find just one single-column story. The act excluded "half-castes" from the definition of an Aboriginal person and, as a result, almost half the residents of missions and reserves had to leave their homes.

Apart from the Barak and Punch petition, no Indigenous people were offered the chance to express what must have been a deep anguish over their removal from their reserves and missions.

I have gone into some detail about the way the paper covered the dismantling of the Coranderrk Reserve and the deeply troubling Victorian Aborigines Protection Act because well into the 20th century, this was the tone and style of the coverage of Indigenous issues. Condescending, sometimes pitying, accepting almost of the suffering – not to mention the massacres – of Aboriginal people in Victoria. And an underlying assumption of the coverage was that, in time, the Indigenous people of Victoria would cease to exist as a people.

Major issues affecting First Nations people were sometimes covered in just a sentence or two. For instance, the fact that in the constitution Indigenous people were not counted as Australian citizens and did have the right to vote was reported in a story that detailed other groups who could not vote, including people in jail. The exclusion

of Aboriginal Australians from the national census was not rectified until the successful 1967 referendum.

Sometimes the paternalism, the racism, is almost casual. In a travel story published in Saturday's *Age* in February 1920, extolling the joys of a visit to the Gippsland Lakes by train and then by steamer to Lakes Entrance, the writer describes a visit to an "aboriginal station where some 100 to 150 aborigines live" in housing provided them by the state government.

"It filled me with sadness," the reporter writes, "to gaze upon the visages of the last surviving members of a race that is fast dying out. Everything possible in the way of providing for their welfare has been done by our Government … but alas the Great Maker did not so constitute them that they could endure civilisation."

Thirty years later, a report in *The Age* on December 4, 1954 had this headline: Meet Mr, Artunta … Abo Names Change.

The story was about a move by the Northern Territory Welfare Department to give Aboriginal men "proper" names such as Mr Smith or Mr Jones, replacing names such as Dingo Mitch and Murdering George. Proper European names.

On May 3, 1961, a motion by the Labor opposition in the Federal Parliament moved an amendment to an Electoral Reform Bill that would have given Indigenous people voting rights in federal elections. The amendment was defeated along party lines, 57 votes to 39.

The Age report was published the next day on page 5 of the paper. The report quoted the then minister for territories, Paul Hasluck, who would later be appointed governor-general, stating that voting rights could not be extended to Aboriginal Australians until "some problems were sorted out". No comments from Indigenous people. No editorial thundering at this great injustice, this example of paternalism. No explanation of what these "problems" might be.

The paternalism was everywhere. In a review of *We Are Going*, a book of poetry by the Aboriginal poet Cath Walker published in the *Saturday Age* in August 1964, the reviewer writes that "much of the verse is thinly disguised doggerel, some of it not even that; and when she uses rhyme, it often trips her up". Poetry that expresses a political viewpoint is not often great, he writes, and Cath Walker's poetry is not even average "political poetry".

"However, one hopes she will keep writing. The more people become aware of the injustices in our society, the more hope there is that something will be done about them."

By 1970, Walker's poetry was widely known and respected. She was a major Australian poet. In 1970 she was offered – and accepted – an MBE following the Queen's visit to Australia. By then, Walker – who in 1987 announced that her Indigenous name was

Oodgeroo Noonuccal – was a powerful voice for a people who had long been voiceless. What had been the cause of this dramatic change in her literary fortunes in just a few years?

One thing that happened was the emergence in the mid-1960s of a charismatic leader of Aboriginal people. In 1965, Charles Perkins, a student at Sydney University – he was later to become the first Indigenous graduate in Australia – led a group of 30 fellow students on the first of what was to be a series of freedom rides through regional NSW and later other states to highlight the discrimination and lack of services in Aboriginal communities.

But nowhere in the coverage of the freedom rides could I find a piece by Perkins himself describing what he and his group were doing.

The Age coverage changed – the tone of it, the way Perkins and subsequently other Indigenous leaders were reported – so that by the time of the 1967 referendum result, as covered on page one of the paper, Indigenous leaders were widely quoted in *Age* reports. Not as victims, but as leaders, demanding action.
This change accelerated in the '80s, '90s and into the first decades of the 21st century. Indigenous leaders across almost every area of life, including sport, were sought out and given a voice.

"Given" is the operative word.

Indigenous voices were filtered by white reporters who decided what was important about what these Indigenous people had to say. Was this because of prejudice, an unstated belief that there were no Indigenous leaders or writers or activists who could write for the paper? In their own voice? Did editors of *The Age* actively seek out Indigenous writers?
I know that I did not do so. Not in any serious or sustained way.

None of this is to denigrate the journalism of *Age* writers from every decade since the 1970s – journalists such as Cameron Forbes, Martin Flanagan, the late Michael Gordon and Jan Mayman and many others, some of whom I know from personal experience pushed editors to give Indigenous issues the space these issues deserved and who increasingly dedicated their working lives to covering Indigenous Australia.

There were shortcomings. Most of these journalists were white men, well educated, left of centre in their politics, most of them with a burning desire to reveal the terrible truths about Indigenous history and about the contemporary racism and discrimination and often Third World conditions that characterise some Indigenous communities.

The result in my view is that too much of the coverage has been suffused with Indigenous victimhood. This has meant that differences in Indigenous communities, differences among Indigenous leaders have not been much examined. In part this is also the result of a lack of Indigenous journalism and writing in the paper.

The story that we published when I was editor that perhaps best illustrates the politics and ethics of Indigenous coverage at *The Age* appeared in June 2001. It was a controversial story involving the Aboriginal leader Geoff Clark. Clark was the leader of the Framlingham Aboriginal community and the head of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission.

It was the most difficult story of my seven years as editor of the paper. Many *Age* readers responded with fury. Some staff were very angry. I was stopped on the street by two writers I knew, on separate occasions, who accused me of betraying Aboriginal Australians and of giving comfort to right-wing racists.

The central issues of the story became less important than whether *The Age* had traduced Aboriginal victimhood. An Aboriginal leader had been accused of being a victimiser.

On July 14, *The Age* ran an announcement online and on page three of the paper that Jack Latimore had been appointed Indigenous affairs journalist.

Jack Latimore has recently joined The Age as Indigenous Affairs reporter.

Latimore, the announcement stated, is a Birpai man with family ties to Thungutti and Gumbaynggirr nations. This is a cause for celebration, but much more could be done. There are so many Indigenous leaders and activists and academics and writers who need to be heard, whatever their politics

When I recall that meeting almost 25 years ago in the editor's office with the man from marketing, I wonder what those circulation figures were revealing. I believe they were not proof that *Age* readers – some *Age* readers – were turned off by coverage of Indigenous issues. What they revealed, in fact, was that we had to do better, deliver more engaging, more challenging journalism. And more stories told by Indigenous writers. I wish I had come to that conclusion back then.

Michael Gawenda was editor of The Age from 1997 to 2004.