

## Rewriting the narrative: Confronting Australia's past in order to determine our future

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**Abstract:** Since colonisation, history has been whitewashed to suit the socio-political aims of the settler. The \$50 million redevelopment of the landing site of Captain Cook, disingenuously renamed the 'Meeting Place Precinct', is stark evidence of this. This essay argues that in order to arrive at a comprehensive understanding of history, Australia must engage in a process of national re-founding via truth-telling and active listening between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples respectively.

**Keywords:** history wars; frontier violence; British invasion

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### Introduction

What Aboriginal people ask is that the modern world now makes the sacrifices necessary to give us a real future... to let us be free of the determined control exerted on us to make us like you. Let us be who we are – Aboriginal people in a modern world – and be proud of us. Acknowledge that we have survived the worst that the past had thrown at us, and we are here with our songs, our ceremonies, our land, our language and our people – our full identity. What a gift this is that we can give you, if you choose to accept us in a meaningful way. (Yunupingu 2016)

The way forward for Australia as a nation must be rooted in a process of truth-telling that prioritises First Nations voices and acknowledges the colonial violence inherent to our history from the moment of British invasion. Such a process would necessitate a practice of deep listening on the part of non-Indigenous Australia, with the hope that we may arrive at a national narrative upon which we can all agree. The \$50 million redevelopment of the 'Meeting Place Precinct' at Kurnell in Botany Bay has little chance of achieving these goals, and is more likely to reinforce false narratives about Australia's foundation and perpetuate the whitewashing of history. The installation of new exhibition and education areas at the site raises concerns about the tokenisation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures for non-Indigenous consumption, and is inadequate as a means of affecting real



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change. The Uluru Statement from the Heart identifies the structural nature of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander disempowerment, and calls for “substantive constitutional change and structural reform” (Referendum Council 2017). This essay will look to historiographical debates to examine mechanisms for tangible change, while interrogating the role that symbolism plays in the process of responding to the past and determining our nation’s future.

### **The Myth of a Peaceful Meeting**

Describing Captain Cook’s 1770 landing on Dharawal land as a “meeting of two cultures” (Sutherland Shire Council 2018), and consequently naming the site “The Meeting Place” (ibid.) is a prime example of mythologising the past in order to better serve present-day political agendas. It is convenient for the Government to conceive of this encounter as a ‘meeting’ as it better suits the political goal of peaceful reconciliation. Maria Nugent echoes this notion, stating that “the recasting of the arrival of Captain Cook at Botany Bay in 1770 as an original cross-cultural meeting from which the nation sprang is suggestive of a new foundational myth, woven from the same event but better suited to modern times” (Nugent 2008, p. 200). This new story replaces the earlier myth of *terra nullius* (‘empty land’) – “the legal doctrine that settlers imposed on the continent... to erase the Indigenous presence from, and claims to, the continent, despite other evidence to the contrary” (Ginsburg & Myers 2006, p. 30). Dangerously, the idea of a ‘meeting’ seems to suggest that the Gweagal clan of the Dharawal tribe all but welcomed the British onto their land.

However, we need only look to Cook’s own diaries to find an account that contradicts this version of events. Cook recounts two Aboriginal men walking onto the beach as the two British longboats approached the shore, and that they “seemed resolved to oppose our landing” (Nugent 2008, p. 200). He reports firing a musket at them twice, as they defended themselves with darts and stones, until one of Cook’s shots hit one of the men in the leg. He concludes, “after this we landed which we had no sooner done than they throw’d two darts at us, this obliged me to fire a third shott soon after which they both made off” (ibid., p. 199). Cook’s own writing reveals that their initial landing was met with opposition resulting in a short conflict. Then, upon leaving Botany Bay, Cook remarks that “we could know but very little of their customs as we were never able to form any connections with them” (ibid., p. 200). With this information at hand, is it fair to say that there was ever a true meeting between the Gweagal clan and the British explorers?

Symbolism in this context is important. It is a means by which we represent our nationalism and make sense of our past. However, speaking in an Australian context, it is not ideal that a memorial to our nation’s ‘founding’ be designed and executed exclusively by the settler state. Mark McKenna (2018) states that “the way we acknowledge our history has the power to make or unmake the nation” (p. 43). The proposed changes to the ‘Meeting Place Precinct’ serve to reinforce a distinctly white narrative of ‘discovery’, painting Captain Cook’s arrival, and the events that followed, in a triumphant light that refuses to acknowledge the ongoing violence of colonialism. As part of the redevelopment, Scott Morrison has announced plans for a large, aquatic monument of Captain Cook to be erected just off the shore of Kurnell, while a ferry service will be reintroduced between La Perouse and Kurnell, “allowing visitors the unique experience of arrival to the site by water, just as Cook did more than 200 years ago” (Office of Environment and Heritage 2017). These plans demonstrate a complete lack of

consideration for the symbolic significance of the site for many First Nations people as a site of invasion. McKenna (2018, p. 87) has expressed that “no other patch of ground captures the dilemma of reconciling European and Indigenous histories in quite the same way.” The recreation of Cook’s arrival as an attraction for visitors is indicative of a gross insensitivity on the part of Morrison and his political colleagues, and a failure to understand the real trauma associated with this day in our nation’s history. Anyone with an understanding that “the invasion that started at Botany Bay is the origin of the fundamental grievance between the old and new Australians: that Australia was colonised without the consent of its rightful owners,” (Referendum Council 2017, p. 17) would be more sensitive in pursuing any redevelopment of the site. I am unconvinced that a new ferry route and another statue of Captain Cook are what we need in order to move forward as a nation.

### **Rewriting History**

Scott Morrison (2018) is concerned that certain things, namely Cook’s arrival at Botany Bay, will be “ignored or relegated” in the telling of history. Conversely, it seems to me that Captain Cook, and his landing on Dharawal soil in 1770, have been central to our national narrative since colonisation, and are in no danger of disappearing. There are, however, numerous parts of our history that have been and continue to be “ignored or relegated”.

In 1968 WEH Stanner coined the term ‘the Great Australian Silence’, describing the omission of Aboriginal affairs from the work of Australian historians at the time as a “cult of forgetfulness” (Stanner 1968, p. 25). He identified something of a turning point in Aboriginal policy in the early 1930s that went unmentioned in the academic literature, noting that “inattention on such a scale cannot possibly be explained by absent-mindedness. It is a structural matter, a view from a window which has been carefully placed to exclude a whole quadrant of the landscape” (Stanner 1968, p. 24). Times have changed since Stanner first made these observations. There now exists a growing field of scholarship in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history and contemporary affairs, and a mounting conversation in the public sphere around rights and recognition. With the elevation of First Nations voices, more people are taking to the streets to join rallies and protests on these issues. However, the mainstream conversation still has trouble addressing certain aspects of our colonial past. A level of silence persists with regard to issues like frontier violence, and the central truth of dispossession. Ann Curthoys (2008, p. 247) notes that “there was neither complete silence before 1968, nor was it completely ended afterwards... [settler history] is more than a simple forgetting; it is an active denial of responsibility.” This rings true today.

Colonists on the Australian frontier described Aboriginal people as ‘treacherous’ in order to deny their humanity and justify unconscionable violence. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples were murdered and massacred at the hands of British colonisers and settlers. Events such as the Myall Creek Massacre and the Waterloo Creek Massacre are examples of countless acts of violence and mass killing that took place across the continent with rapid colonial expansion and dispossession. These acts were often justified by the fictional perception of Aboriginal ‘treachery’, leading Barry Morris (1992, p. 87) to note that “fiction and reality were inexorably intertwined in the killing and the maiming of Aborigines along the pastoral frontier.” The narratives we tell ourselves are important. However, contemporary Australia has difficulty acknowledging “the prevalence of warfare, massacre

and exploitation during what had previously been represented as a 'peaceful settlement'" (Goodall 2002, p. 8). Problematically, in present day debates and historical accounts, "even where frontier violence is acknowledged, it can too often become simply another means of placing Aborigines in the past" (Curthoys 2008, p. 242). The ways in which frontier violence has been periodically documented and then forgotten reveals a tendency for 'silence', by Stanner's meaning of the term, to shift and evolve throughout history. To this point, Curthoys (2008, p. 242) notes that "nineteenth century historians and commentators often exhibited an awareness of frontier conflict that has disappeared by the twentieth century."

Scott Morrison (2018) claims that "you don't have to go back and change things that were written in the past." I would argue that if our history does not encompass a diversity of voices, instead presenting a biased, incomplete, and inaccurate representation of the past, it is time for us to go back and make some additions. In order to move forward as a nation with any kind of unity, we must come to understand that our colonial past "has created Australia as much as Anzac, the White Australia Policy, immigration, the agendas of our governments and institutions, and the land itself" (McKenna 2018, p. 134). Ironically, Kurnell – the very site Morrison is speaking about – is an example of a place where history has been rewritten repeatedly by a government pen. The name of the site has been changed by the Sutherland Shire Council over the years from 'the birthplace of Australia', to 'the birthplace of a nation', to 'the birthplace of modern Australia', and most recently, 'the Meeting Place Precinct'. Each change offers a slightly different interpretation of history to reflect the politics and social attitudes of the time, illustrating the point that "national commemorations... are determined more by the politics of the present than the ideals of the past" (Davison 2000, in Nugent 2008, p. 200). Australian politicians seem to have no qualms about rewriting or reframing history when it suits their own agenda.

### **The Need for a Shared Narrative**

In part, our capacity to adequately respond to our colonial past depends on our ability to agree upon a national narrative. Mark McKenna uses the language of "national re-founding" (2018, p. 135), stressing that "the history wars of recent decades have left us with competing narratives of the nation's foundation. The silence may have lifted, but the state's failure to acknowledge fully the historical experience of Indigenous Australians in the wake of British colonisation remains" (ibid., p. 63).

Galarrwuy Yunupingu (2016) urged us "to honestly recognise the truth of history, and to reconcile that truth in a way that finds unity in the future." Listening to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices at this point is the least we can do. If we do not take on this simple task, we will continue to view our nation through a colonial, European lens, and Australia will not progress in a positive or unified way. Such a process of listening could be achieved through a truth-telling commission, as called for in the Uluru Statement, in the spirit of *makarrata* – "the coming together after a struggle" (Referendum Council 2017). This process is not without historical precedent. Australia could look to the example of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in post-Apartheid South Africa, or more recently in Canada.

In any case, it seems evident that we must now look to new ways of addressing these issues. In McKenna's words, we have arrived at a moment of truth, "we either make the Commonwealth stronger and more complete through an honest reckoning with the past... or we unmake the nation by clinging to triumphant narratives... retreat once more into the old attitudes that helped us to conquer and settle the country" (McKenna 2018, pp. 133-134).

### **Mechanisms for Change**

The Australian people do not wish to recognise me for who I am – with all that this brings – and it is the Australian people whom the politicians fear. The Australian people know that their success is built on the taking of the land, in making the country their own, which they did at the expense of so many languages and ceremonies and songlines – and people – now destroyed. They worry about what has been done for them and on their behalf, and they know that reconciliation requires much more than just words. (Yunupingu 2016)

Symbolic recognition, shifting of public perception and changes to our national narrative must be paired with structural change. We have multiple mechanisms available to us with which to effect change at a structural level. Unfortunately, I do not have room in this discussion to properly evaluate the merits of each, however this is truly a case in which we must turn to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and ensure that they are heard. First Nations voices should carry the greatest weight in this discussion. Marcia Langton speaks to the need for change to be sought at a legal and structural level, and beyond this, insisting that "an honourable place for Indigenous Australians in the modern nation-state... must now be found both through, and beyond, the limits of a legal discursive framework that de-humanises and de-historicises Aboriginal people" (Langton 2001, pp. 13-14).

Constitutional recognition has emerged as the dominant way by which most Australians believe we can address historical wrongs. Recognition would involve amendment or removal of section 51 (xxvi) of the Constitution, also known as the 'race power', removal of section 25, and the establishment of a First Nations voice to parliament, among other changes. Speaking in favour of constitutional recognition, Noel Pearson (2014, p. 72) asserted that "suffering and exclusion will continue for as long as we don't perfect the basis of our citizenship." Meanwhile, others feel strongly that a treaty would better acknowledge the long history of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander occupation of this land while establishing a way forward that is based upon mutual goals between two sovereign states and principles of self-determination. Gorrie (2016) emphasises that "a treaty forces you to see me as an equal with a separate identity, history, and culture that has existed for tens of thousands of years. Recognition forces me to ask to be seen by you in a colonial system that I don't want to legitimise." The task at hand remains to identify a structural alternative to assimilation or national fragmentation, to find a way "where peoples within nation-states come to terms with each other and commit to the nation, while respecting the existential anxieties of distinct peoples" (Pearson 2014, p. 7).

## Conclusion

The \$50 million redevelopment of the ‘Meeting Place Precinct’ at Botany Bay raises questions about “the whole history of dispossession and how it should be publicly acknowledged” (McKenna, p. 87). This essay has argued that Australia must engage in a process of national re-founding on a basis of truth. The dual processes of truth-telling and active listening could allow us to refute colonial myths and arrive at a more complete understanding of history. Australia as a nation should respond to its colonial past by working to arrive at a shared national narrative, while pursuing structural change to address the systemic disempowerment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples on their own land.

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